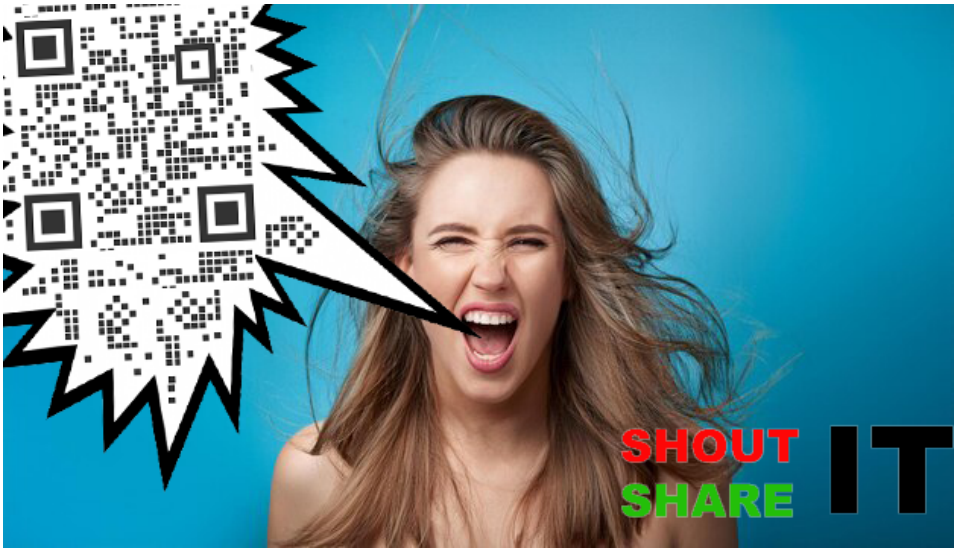
Democracy's Might

Democracy's Right, Book II

Christopher G. Nuttall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Annotation

Book II of *Democracy's Right*.

The rebels have won a great victory, shattering the Empire's grip on Sector 117. Starships are mutinying, the Empire's power and authority are crumbling and the rebels are making their way towards Earth. Their victory seems inevitable.

But, as news of the rebellion finally reaches Earth, the Thousand Families start preparing for all-out war. The Empire has a war leader, a colossal advantage in firepower and the determination to do whatever it takes to destroy the rebels before they can win.

As both sides rush towards a titanic confrontation, they know that whoever wins will inherit the Empire. But, with humanity's mighty civilisation threatening to collapse, they may only inherit a desert called peace.

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DEMOCRACY'S MIGHT

Author's Note

Democracy's Might is Book II of *The Democracy Series*, following *Democracy's Right*. It will probably be completely incomprehensible to someone without reading *Democracy's Right* first. Fortunately, *Democracy's Right* is available on Kindle; a free sample can be downloaded from my website.

It is my intention to write Book III in March or April 2014.

If you like this book, please review it on Amazon and join my facebook page or mailing list.

Thank you for your time.

Christopher Nuttall

Prologue

"Transit complete, sir."

Captain Saku Rautiainen sucked in his breath as Jupiter appeared on the viewscreen. Easily one of the largest gas giants known to mankind, it dominated the Sol System, the Great Red Spot blazing out in the interstellar darkness. Hundreds of installations orbited the gas giant, ranging from large industrial nodes and cloudscoops to a giant Class-III shipyard. Jupiter had powered humanity's expansion into the galaxy ever since the human race had first started to reach into space. Its shipyards produced a tenth of all new human starships.

It was an impressive sight, Saku decided. Even knowing that most of the installations were owned by the Cicero Family, even knowing that they contributed mightily to humanity's bondage, they were still impressive. He took one last look, then glanced down at his display, checking that the IFF codes had been accepted by the defences. If the Geeks had failed, the whole operation was about to come to a short and violent end.

"They accepted our codes," Martin McKenzie said. "Don't they know there's a war on?"

Saku smirked. It had been seven months since the first mutiny, six months since word had finally been sent to Earth — and barely a week since it had arrived at the heart of the Empire. There were so many defences in orbit around Earth and the other planets in the Sol System that attack seemed inconceivable. Earth hadn't been directly threatened for thousands of years, unless one counted the Empress's suborning of Home Fleet. The mutinies had taken place thousands of light years away. It was unlikely that the defenders of Earth realised that they might be attacked within days of word reaching the planet.

"I don't think they've realised it yet," he said. "Take us in."

He glanced over at his old friend and smiled. McKenzie had worked for one of the big shipping lines before suffering an accident that had damaged his legs, leaving him permanently stuck in a mover. The shipping line might have abandoned him, but he'd somehow managed to find work on an independent freighter, work that had eventually led him to the underground. He'd volunteered for the mission as soon as he'd heard about it, despite the near-certainty that they wouldn't escape. Like Saku, McKenzie had scores to pay off.

The defences did nothing as the giant freighter inched closer and closer to the heart of the complex, the giant Class-III shipyard. There were only three such shipyards in the Empire, the only ones authorised to design and build superdreadnaughts. Not that the Empire had done much of *that* in the last two hundred years. The

Empire's monopoly on superdreadnaughts — and possession of the biggest hammer in the galaxy — had allowed the designers to slow down and stop trying to improve their work. Somehow, Saku had a feeling that they were going to regret it.

He smiled to himself. The Empire was stagnant; the Thousand Families, who ran the Empire, saw no reason to invest in Research and Development efforts which might change the status quo. After all, something might come up which would invalidate all of their monopolies and shatter their grip on power. But they were going to regret that too.

"Picking up a signal," McKenzie said. "They want us to head for a specific access port and prepare to be boarded."

"Too late," Saku said. The Underground had obtained the access codes years ago, they'd just never had a good reason to use them. Even the Empire could adapt quickly if given a nasty poke. "Do you have proper targeting solutions?"

"Yes, sir," McKenzie said. He sounded faintly offended by the question. "We might as well be at point-blank range."

"Good," Saku said. "Blow the hatches, then open fire."

The underground had worked hard to turn the seemingly-harmless freighter into a q-ship. Her hull looked normal, until the hatches were removed, revealing the missile launchers hidden underneath. If someone was monitoring their progress, they'd know that something was badly wrong… but it was already too late. The giant freighter shuddered as she launched her missiles, targeted directly on the shipyard. It would be bare seconds before they struck their targets and wiped them from existence.

"Gunboats and assault shuttles incoming," McKenzie warned. "I think they've spotted us."

Saku barely heard him. The shipyard had been torn apart, shattered by the missiles. His ship's automated systems were already firing a second salvo, targeting industrial nodes and smaller complexes the Empire might be able to use to repair the damage. A cold satisfaction flooded through his body as he watched the shipyard die. It was a symbol of the Empire's oppression of the entire human race. Whatever happened, now that the galaxy was at war, the Empire's monumental self-confidence would not survive.

"Thank you," he said, softly.

Moments later, the gunboats tore the freighter apart.

Chapter One

The High City was considered the oddest city on Earth, with good reason. Unlike the rest of the planet's inhabitants, the aristocrats lived in paradise. A thousand kilometres of land around the High City had been turned into a garden, allowing everything from gentle walks to hunting, fishing and hawking. At the edge of the garden, there was a security wall that prevented anyone from entering the High City without permission, keeping the aristocrats safe. Combined with Earth's giant orbital defences and the looming presence of Home Fleet, it was the safest place in the Empire.

Lord Tiberius Cicero, Family Head of House Cicero, stood at the window and stared out over his family's lands. A dozen mansions, gleaming in the sunlight, provided homes for the family's members, while — beyond them — a handful of barracks housed the family's advisors, servants and Household Troops. There were thousands of people who were part of House Cicero and billions more who worked for the family, directly or indirectly. And all of them acknowledged Tiberius as their master.

Unless they think they can get away with something, Tiberius thought, sourly. There were times when he seriously considered holding a cull. He was young, the only heir his father had had, so he'd won the position of Family Head by default. If he'd realised, at the time, that there was more to the position than just the title, he might have insisted that the Family Council pick another heir. *Half of them want me dead — or at least out of their way*.

He gritted his teeth as he caught sight of his own reflection. Unlike most of the family children, he had largely chosen to stay with the distinctive features his great-grandfather had engineered into the family line. Short brown hair, a strong rather than handsome face… and a nose too large to be elegant. He looked like a young man wearing his father's body… which, in a sense, was true. The genetic modifications worked into the family line had ensured that the children were near-copies of their parents.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called, without turning round. There was no point in looking to see who was outside. The strict etiquette of the High City forbade any of his family enemies from visiting him without seeking permission first, which gave him an opportunity to deny them entry. And if the underground had successfully penetrated the complex, he and the entire family was dead.

"I have the latest reports from Jupiter, My Lord," Sharon said. She was an older woman, although she had once been a beauty in her

youth. “The shipyard has been rendered completely unusable.”

Destroyed, you mean, Tiberius thought. He’d been shocked, then angered, by the news. Now, all he could do was push his feelings aside and gird for war. *The family will not be happy*.

Sharon flinched at his expression. It wasn’t uncommon in the Empire for the messenger to be blamed for the message. Even *he* had been known to snap angrily at messengers, even though they could not logically be blamed for the content of the message. Sharon had been with him long enough to know that he never meant it, but still…

Tiberius shook his head as he turned to face her, taking the datapad and skimming it rapidly. It was traditional to hire a personal assistant who was beautiful, rather than intelligent, but Tiberius had rapidly learned that such assistants were largely useless. Sharon might not be a beauty — now, anyway — but she was brisk, efficient and knowledgeable. And she wasn’t a distraction from his work. It would have been easy to sink into a life of luxury and ignore the outside universe. There were times when he found himself seriously considering abandoning his responsibilities and walking away.

“The Families Council has called a meeting,” Sharon added, when Tiberius had finished scanning the datapad. “They want a full meet in thirty minutes.”

Tiberius wasn’t surprised. It had barely been a week since the first tidings from Sector 117 had arrived on Earth, carrying news of absolute disaster. The Thousand Families had been stunned and angered, then they’d started looking to see what advantage each of them could pull from the chaos. But they would eventually have to start working together, wouldn’t they? The rebels had managed the impossible and pulled together thousands of disparate factions, creating the largest single threat the Empire had faced since its foundation. It’s rulers would have to work together too.

“Tell them I’ll be there,” he said, turning away from the window and walking towards his desk. “Call me five minutes before the meeting is due to start.”

His grandfather had designed the office himself, Tiberius knew, which might be why he hated it. The old man had been a ruthless grasping bastard, always struggling to put the family ahead of everything else; his office had been designed to show off his wealth and power. Priceless artworks hung everywhere, clashing together in a display that showcased the family’s possessions — and their master’s lack of any real taste. Charm and elegance might dominate the rest of the mansion, but not in his grandfather’s office. Tiberius had seriously considered redecorating as soon as he moved in, before deciding that it wouldn’t be good to become too comfortable.

He read through the report twice, looking for hope. But there was

nothing. The core of the Jupiter Shipyard had been destroyed, leaving the family with an immense bill for repairs at the worst possible time. Reading between the lines, Tiberius suspected that it would be cheaper to build a completely new shipyard. The weasel words written by the bureaucrat who'd signed off on the report hinted as much.

It could be worse, I suppose, he told himself. *The Roosevelt Family is screwed completely*.

Once, he would have taken a small amount of pleasure in watching a mighty family brought low. Lord Paul Roosevelt was just as much of a grasping bastard as Tiberius's grandfather, without the virtue of belonging to the same family. His push to take sole control of Sector 117 — and Jackson's Folly — had alienated most of the other families. Now, with the rebels in control of the family's investment, the entire clan was tottering and threatening to collapse into rubble. It would be nice to watch Lord Paul humbled…

… But not if the fall of one family brought the entire Empire down too.

His intercom buzzed. "My Lord," Sharon said, "the meeting will take place in five minutes."

Tiberius nodded and stood, walking to a sealed door hidden behind a large portrait of a woman with an enigmatic smile. It opened, once the sensor had checked his DNA, revealing a comfortable chair and an empty table. Few of the Family Heads would choose to willingly enter another's mansion, even for a top security meeting. Instead, they sat in their rooms and projected their images to the others. One by one, they flickered into existence, only a faint shimmer betraying their true nature. Tiberius sat upright as one of the automated systems placed a drink by his chair. He was younger than the others, easily the youngest Family Head in four centuries. It was important that he be taken seriously.

Everyone knew that there were a thousand aristocratic families in the Empire. What everyone *didn't* know — but should have been able to guess — was that some of the Thousand Families were more important than the others. The eleven most powerful families formed the Families Council, which was intended to deal with problems outside the remit of a single family. Tiberius scowled as he realised that, counting himself, there were only ten Family Heads in the room. The family that would replace the Roosevelt Family had not yet been identified.

If we vote, we could be deadlocked, he thought. Traditionally, a vote taken by all eleven families was binding. But a deadlocked vote was effectively useless.

"The meeting will come to order," Lady Madeline Hohenzollern said. She was over a hundred years old, yet looked young enough to

pass for Tiberius's sister. He knew better than to turn his back on her. "The subject in front of us is the mutiny in Sector 117 and subsequent events. I call upon Grand Admiral Joseph Porter to brief us."

She lifted a hand. Grand Admiral Porter appeared at the other end of the table, looking uncomfortable. Unusually, he was neutral, without belonging to any of the Thousand Families; he only held his post because none of the families wished to hand so much power to another family. But it also meant that none of the families would defend him, if they started looking for a scapegoat. And it was certain, Tiberius knew, that they *would* start looking for someone to blame.

"My Lords and Ladies," Porter said. His voice was perfect, too perfect. Tiberius guessed he was using a voder to appear calm, despite the breach in protocol. "The situation is grave."

He paused for effect, then carried on. "The first mutinies took place on the Jackson's Folly Observation Squadron," he informed them. "Led by Commander Colin Walker, the mutineers seized the squadron — and then the superdreadnaughts that were intended to spearhead the… occupation of Jackson's Folly. Once the superdreadnaughts were under their control, the mutineers captured or destroyed the Annual Fleet, then started a campaign intended to undermine our control of the sector. This culminated with an attack on Camelot, which ended with the rebels in firm control of the sector. An attempt to regain control three weeks later failed."

Tiberius scowled. It took six months to get a message from Earth to Jackson's Folly. By the time they'd received word of the first mutinies, Camelot had already fallen to the rebels and the Empire's control had been shattered. Presumably, the rebels would advance towards Earth — they had to know that the Empire *still* maintained an immense advantage in industrial production — and the time delay would slip, but it would still be hard masterminding the war from Earth. But did they dare trust someone with enough firepower and independent authority to stop the rebels?

"The rebels also uploaded a message into the Interstellar Communications Network," Porter continued. "The message, in short, incited mutiny among others outside Sector 117. By now, we have received reports of hundreds of mutinies and small uprisings on thousands of worlds. At worst, we could be looking at the loss of a third of our combat-capable units to the rebels."

Tiberius heard someone swear out loud. He couldn't blame him.

"Right now, we do not know how far the rebellion has spread," Porter concluded. "We are persistently six months out of date. The last message we received suggested that rebel ships had reached Sector 69, which is on a direct line to Earth from Camelot. However, we do not have a comprehensive picture of their movements. They might easily

have advanced closer to Earth."

Tiberius had no illusions about the Empire's popularity. It had none. The only saving grace had been that the different underground factions had been unable to unite into a coherent threat. Imperial Intelligence had worked hard to keep them at loggerheads, sometimes passing up on the opportunity to wipe them out just so the underground remained disunited and harmless. But now… the underground had a leader and *hope*. If a third of the Imperial Navy had fallen into rebel hands, the Thousand Families were staring defeat in the face.

He tapped the table for attention. "How many of those ships *have* fallen into rebel hands?"

"We don't know," Porter confessed. "There were mutinies that gutted the interiors of their ships, starships that were intercepted and destroyed before they could escape… and it will still take months for them to unite their fleets. Quite a few of them might have gone rogue and become pirates. We simply don't know."

"Very well," Lady Madeline said. "How do we respond to this crisis?"

"War," Lord Bernadotte said. "The rebels, by their own declaration, want our blood. I do not believe that we can *compromise* with them in any meaningful way."

"But war would be immensely costly," Lord Rothschild pointed out. "We are already facing the economic fallout from the Roosevelt Collapse" — he paused to peer at the empty space where Lord Paul Roosevelt should have sat — "and large expenditures now would be disastrous. If we lose a second or third family, we might lose the Empire."

"We are already risking the loss of the Empire," Lord Bernadotte snapped. "The rebels want us *dead*. They are not likely to agree to stay in Sector 117, leaving the rest of the human-settled galaxy to us. At the very least, they would demand the end of the Thousand Families and our control over the Empire."

There was a long pause as the assembled Family Heads considered the matter. Their ancestors had been the men and women who had built and funded the Empire. In exchange, they had assured themselves — and their descendents — of control over the structure they had built. They might have argued constantly over the exact direction of the Empire, but they had never allowed outsiders into power. Indeed, they'd started even refusing to allow outsiders to marry into the families. In hindsight, Tiberius suspected, that had been a mistake.

If the rebels broke the Thousand Families and their monopoly on power, no one had any illusions about what would happen next. At

best, their family-owned corporations would be outmatched and destroyed by free competition; at worst, there would be a purge, with their relatives killed or dumped on penal worlds. There would be no hope of rebuilding their position after a rebel defeat. Lord Bernadotte was right.

But Tiberius knew that Lord Rothschild was also right. War would be costly. The Empire might win the war, only to lose itself when the economy collapsed.

"War, then," Lady Madeline said, after the vote was taken. Seven out of ten voted for war, leaving three doves isolated at the table. "Admiral… how can we win?"

Tiberius listened absently as Admiral Porter droned on about activating starships from the reserves and conscripting officers and men from civilian life. He was no space combat expert — and besides, he was grimly aware that Admiral Porter was no expert either. A past master at bureaucratic infighting, skilful enough to maintain his position despite a lack of powerful patrons… but no expert in actual *combat*. He had never even stood on the command deck of a starship, let alone taken her into action.

"I have tactical officers currently analysing the entire situation," Porter said. "In addition, we have the testimony of Captain Quick, who was brought back to us by… intelligence officers."

Tiberius smiled. One of *his* people had had the wit to take Captain Quick from Camelot before the planet fell to the rebels. Tiberius had rewarded and promoted the man, then handed Captain Quick over to Imperial Intelligence and ONI. There was no point in trying to seek advantage from holding her, not with the Empire at risk…

He tapped the table as Admiral Porter began to wind down. "There remains one final issue," he said. There was no need to involve himself — or the rest of the Family Heads — in the precise details of the mobilisation. Admiral Porter was trying to smoother them in minutia. "Who do we place in command of the fleet?"

A rustle ran around the table. They all had clients within the Imperial Navy, officers they patronised and promoted in exchange for obedience and support. Patronage networks underlined the Navy, ensuring that no one family gained control of sufficient firepower to take out the rest of the aristocracy. After the Empress, the question of control had pervaded all of their discussions. Whoever they put in command of the defence against the rebels had to be someone completely loyal…

… And no such paragon existed. How could he when there were so many masters?

But there was one person who was loyal to the Imperial Navy. He would have to do.

“We need unity of command,” Tiberius said. Having a dozen officers, each one loyal to a different family, would be disastrous. Political infighting was acceptable under normal conditions, but this was war. The rebels would not hesitate to take advantage of fractures within the Imperial Navy. “I propose that we appoint Admiral Wachter to command the fleet.”

“Oh,” Lord Rothschild said. It was impossible to tell if he approved or not. The Rothschild Family had fewer connections to the Imperial Navy than most of the others. “And why him, specifically?”

Tiberius smiled. “We can’t assign anyone from our families,” he said. Even *he* would be tempted, if he controlled so much firepower. “But we don’t dare appoint someone who *isn’t* from the aristocracy. Admiral Wachter is skilful, loyal and devoted to the Imperial Navy. If he had wanted to be disloyal, he had plenty of chances before he was… retired from the service.”

He felt his smile grow wider. Admiral Wachter had alienated too many members of the aristocracy and their clients, including Admiral Percival. But Percival was dead or wishing he was, while the Roosevelt Family was collapsing into nothingness. There was a window of opportunity to rehabilitate Admiral Wachter and Tiberius intended to take it. Once there was someone reliable in command, the combination of superior firepower and superior industrial production would ensure that the rebels were stopped.

There was a long debate, unsurprisingly, but there was no real opposition. Tiberius accessed his personal communication channel and asked Sharon to invite Admiral Wachter to the mansion, then started laying additional plans of his own. Stopping the rebels was important, yes, but it was equally important to safeguard the family. Opening secret lines of communication might only benefit both sides. The other families would object, of course, if it became public…

Tiberius shook his head. They would be doing the same thing too.

And besides, he added, in the privacy of his own head, the Cicero Family had an unfair advantage. All it required was the right messenger…

Chapter Two

Admiral Joshua Wachter was a short, stumpy man, wearing a simple black uniform without any rank badges or medals. No, Tiberius realised, as the Admiral came to a halt in front of his desk; it wasn't a uniform at all, just something tailored to resemble one. The Admiral was making a statement, warning Tiberius that he still considered himself a naval officer first and foremost. Tiberius was almost relieved. It was nice to deal with someone who wasn't putting his own interests — or his Patron's interests — ahead of everything else.

"Please, be seated," Tiberius said. "We have a great deal to talk about."

He studied the Admiral with some interest as the older man sat down. Like most aristocrats, the Admiral could have taken advantage of the latest rejuvenation treatments, but it was clear that he hadn't bothered. His medical file stated that his last treatment had been two weeks after he'd been placed on permanent leave from the Navy. It was clear that Wachter lacked the vanity of so many other officers his age.

"The rebellion, I presume," the Admiral said.

Tiberius wasn't too surprised. In theory, Public Information was maintaining a complete news blackout, but the destruction of the Jupiter Shipyard was hard to miss. By now, according to his sources, word was spreading rapidly through the Sol System. The Empire might control all licensed media outlets, but the underground had its own ways of spreading information. And someone like the Admiral would probably still have friends in the Navy, men and women who might pass on the word.

"Yes," Tiberius said. He picked up a datapad from his desk and held it out. "This is the situation, as of this morning. I won't insult your intelligence by pointing out that much of it is out of date."

The Admiral quirked his eyebrows, then took the pad and started to read. Tiberius watched carefully, trying to read the man's emotions, but it was impossible. The Admiral was well-schooled in keeping his face expressionless, even without an electronic mask or emotional control implants. That too wasn't surprising. No one reached high office without the ability to mask their emotions, dissemble and lie outright, should it be necessary.

"Interesting," the Admiral observed, when he had finished. "You do realise the underlying *cause* of this revolution?"

Tiberius suspected he did, but motioned for Wachter to continue anyway.

"The system is not designed to allow the smart, talented and

ambitious a chance to flourish," the Admiral said. "Men and women who *know* they are more competent than their superiors are kept back, watching helplessly as people are promoted merely on the grounds of birth or their willingness to kiss the ass of the aristocrats. It doesn't really breed loyalty when you constantly keep the talented down, does it?"

"Apparently not," Tiberius agreed, coolly.

"Take yourself, for example," the Admiral continued. "You are younger and less experienced than most of the adults in your family. Your sole qualification for being Family Head is being the biological son of the previous Family Head. I would not be too surprised if elements in your family were quietly trying to undermine your position. Why should they not resent your elevation over your head?"

Tiberius knew the Admiral had a point. He'd never *asked* to succeed his father; indeed, he'd expected the old man had many years to go before death. But he hadn't really been given a choice.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you for being direct," he said. "Let me ask you a question in return. Which side are you on?"

Others, he knew, would probably not give him a honest answer. But he had a feeling the Admiral would be honest, even if it killed him.

The Admiral considered the question for a long moment. "The Empire has its flaws, but it maintains human unity and human unity is the key to human survival," he said, finally. "We were taught that in the last interstellar war. The rebels may seek reform now, but they will unleash forces that will either shatter the Empire or push them to replacing the Thousand Families with an aristocracy of their own. The only thing holding humanity together is the strong hand of Empire. I cannot side with rebels."

He met Tiberius's eyes. "Which isn't to say that I don't think reforms have to be made," he added. "The rebels do have legitimate complaints. If you could answer them, you may prevent future rebellions."

Tiberius remembered the Empress and shuddered. There was no way the Families Council would agree to dismantle the patronage networks, if that was even possible. The networks weren't just there to boost their power and status, they were there to prevent another Empress from seizing control of a large portion of the fleet and turning it against the Empire. But the networks seemed to have failed. The rebels might be six months from Earth — but that had been six months ago. Where were they now?

"That would be difficult," he admitted. Capable officers were ambitious officers — and ambition was dangerous. "We couldn't bring them all into the families…"

The Admiral smiled. “Why not? It would help prevent inbreeding.”

Tiberius’s eyes narrowed. The suggestion that the Thousand Families were inbred was an old slur, but it wasn’t true. Genetic engineering ensured that there were no problems with inbreeding for the families, no matter how closely they were related. Hell, there was so much engineering that it was questionable just how much of Tiberius’s father had gone into him.

“Oh, not biological inbreeding,” the Admiral said. “Intellectual inbreeding. The echo chamber created by having so many people in agreement talking together, without allowing any room for new ideas along with new blood. How many of your fellow aristocrats could even begin to understand life outside the High City?”

“Point,” Tiberius conceded, ruefully. “Most of them wouldn’t even know where to begin, if they were kicked out of the High City.”

He sighed, remembering old battles. In his opinion, at least two-thirds of the family were little more than oxygen thieves — and he suspected the same was true of the other major families. They enjoyed themselves, partying endlessly, while Tiberius and the other more responsible adults handled all the work. But then, even the vast domains of the Cicero Family were insufficient to give everyone something meaningful to do. And to think there were times when he envied the social butterflies!

“That isn’t what I called you here to discuss,” he said, rubbing his forehead. There was too much to do and too little time. “We are currently assembling a fleet to confront and defeat the rebels before they spread too far. I would like you to take command of the fleet.”

The Admiral lifted an eyebrow in pretend surprise. “Why me?”

“Because you’re loyal to the Empire,” Tiberius said. “Because you’re *not* loyal to a single Family. Because you are a competent naval officer. Because…”

He shook his head. “There are good reasons to select you,” he added. “And the Families Council signed off on it.”

“I’m sure that must have been a long argument,” the Admiral commented. He leaned back in his chair and placed his fingertips together. “And why should I take the job?”

“Because you’re loyal to the Empire,” Tiberius said. He’d read the Admiral’s file carefully, line by line. It had stated that the Admiral was desperate to return to space. “And because you understand what’s at stake.”

There was a long pause as the Admiral considered it, his face impassive. “There are conditions,” he said, finally.

“Name them,” Tiberius said. He wasn’t in the mood to bargain. “What do you want?”

The Admiral ticked off points on his fingers. “You can’t run the war from Earth,” he said. “I want overall authority to operate without referring every decision back to you. I want authority to remove officers who don’t live up to my standards or are hopelessly corrupt. I want authority to activate the naval reserves, access naval stores and other measures to get the fleet into fighting trim without having to seek permission from Luna Base.”

Tiberius felt his eyes narrow, again. “You think the fleet isn’t in fighting trim?”

“I would be very surprised if it is,” the Admiral said, bluntly. “When I was last on the command deck of a superdreadnaught, corrupt officers had a nasty habit of stealing supplies and selling them off. I expect the missiles that destroyed the Jupiter Shipyards came from the Imperial Navy, originally. Even if they didn’t…”

He shrugged. “And morale will be in the pits,” he added. “Which leads to another point. I don’t want Blackshirts on the ships. Putting them on ships in Sector 117 was idiotic, to say the least. I’m not surprised that the crews mutinied. The Blackshirts are *animals*.”

“I know,” Tiberius said, quietly.

“And one other thing,” the Admiral said. “I know there will be spies in the command staff and spies in the crews. The patronage networks will see to that, I expect. But I don’t want anyone undermining my authority. If you want to relieve me of command, that’s one thing — I’ll accept it, even if I won’t like it. I won’t tolerate officers trying to undermine me or asserting separate authority. One hint of that and I will put the officer in question out an airlock.”

Tiberius met his eyes, seeing nothing but grim resolve. The Thousand Families had been leery of placing so much power into a single person’s hands, even before the Empress had reminded them of the wisdom of that policy. If the Admiral was secretly disloyal — or even merely ambitious — he would have ample opportunity to prepare the ground for a coup. The patronage networks normally made that tricky, if not impossible. But if the networks were told to keep their heads down…

There would be no checks and balances, nothing to prevent the Admiral from laying his own plans. He’d been a legend in the Imperial Navy a long time before Tiberius had even been born, one of the few Admirals to earn respect from all ranks. And yet, if he’d wanted to be disloyal, he could just have kept his mouth shut. Instead, he was practically daring Tiberius to reject him. Or was it a cunning double-bluff?

Or was he completely unaware of the political subtext? Did he just want the tools he needed to do the job properly, no matter the political cost?

“I believe I can ensure that no one challenges you openly,” Tiberius said, slowly. “But I’m afraid there will be spies. I doubt I could convince the others to remove them.”

“Probably not, no,” the Admiral said. He looked down at the datapad, then back up at Tiberius. “Admiral Porter — or rather his command staff — is correct to suggest that we prepare our defensive lines at Morrison. The rebels will, assuming they drive on Earth, have to reduce and occupy the base to protect their rear. My fleet will assemble there, then lure the rebels into battle in a time and place of our choosing.”

“There will be objections,” Tiberius pointed out, mildly. “Hundreds of worlds are at risk.”

The Admiral snorted. “I cannot defend everywhere,” he said. “If I spread out the fleet, we will risk losing everything. The rebels will simply concentrate their forces against one target after another. Smaller worlds add nothing to their strength, so they can be recovered after the rebel fleet is destroyed.”

Tiberius nodded. “Why not attack directly towards Jackson’s Folly?”

“I doubt the fleet is in any condition to take the offensive,” the Admiral admitted. “The rebels will know that we have a huge production advantage. Their only hope for victory is to attack Earth and the other Core Worlds as soon as possible. The autonomous worlds may even consider joining the rebels if the rebels look likely to win.”

He shrugged. “Besides, we don’t know where the rebel shipyards are,” he added. “Given three or four years to build up our forces, we can start scouring the Beyond for their bases.”

Tiberius winced. “How long will it take to finish the war?”

The Admiral gave him a quirky grin. “The war could be shortened considerably by making the wrong decisions now,” he said. “But war is a democracy. The enemy gets a vote.”

“Finish it as quickly as possible,” Tiberius said. The Empire hadn’t mobilised the entire Imperial Navy in centuries. Even bringing the naval reserves up to full fighting trim would be costly — and, right now, the Empire’s economy was fragile. What would happen if it collapsed completely? “We don’t know how much time we have before the Empire falls.”

“No,” the Admiral said. “I suppose you don’t.”

Sharon entered the office when Tiberius called her, then escorted the Admiral to the shuttle that would take him to his new flagship. Tiberius watched him go, hoping that he’d done the right thing by pushing the Admiral forward. Even if he was loyal, it had been years since the Admiral had set foot on a command deck. What if he’d lost

the knack?

He pushed his thoughts aside as two of his cousins, Lady Gwendolyn Cicero and Lord Pompey Cicero, were shown into the office. Gwendolyn was tall, heartbreakingly beautiful and had a mind like a steel trap, as countless would-be lovers had found out to their discomfort and dismay. There was a reason she was tipped to head up the family's intelligence apparatus after her great-uncle resigned. She had a remarkable talent for extracting information from unwilling donors. Beside her, Pompey seemed to almost fade into the background, which suited him quite nicely. There were few better experts on security measures and countermeasures in the High City.

And they were both young enough to actually *think*.

Tiberius nodded to them both as they sat down, Gwendolyn artfully arranging herself so she displayed the tops of her breasts to watching eyes. He knew better than to trust her completely, not when she had enough ambition for the entire family hidden under her smile, but he knew that she could be trusted to put the family's interests ahead of her own. After all, even Tiberius could not remain in the family if he alienated everyone else. Pompey, on the other hand, had no real ambition. It wasn't always a character flaw.

"You know the situation, I assume," he said. They would probably have heard the full story from one of Gwendolyn's sources. Tiberius knew for a fact that she was bedding a senior member of the Rothschild Family, someone high enough to isolate facts from the rumours flying through the High City. "I have a specific task for you two."

Gwendolyn smiled, winsomely. "For us, My Lord?"

"For you," Tiberius confirmed, shortly. If there was one thing he knew about Gwendolyn, it was never to lower his guard around her. "This rebellion threatens the interests of the family as well as the Empire as a whole. We may lose the war."

"Surely not, My Lord," Gwendolyn said. She was mocking him, very slightly. "The Empire is invincible."

"We may defeat the rebels, but lose the war," Tiberius said, coldly. "The cost of defeating them might well add to the economic damage we have already suffered. If the ties binding our economy start to collapse, we will find ourselves scrabbling over the pieces of the Empire and fighting a civil war. We might not come out ahead."

He scowled, contemplating the possibilities. If the infighting between the Thousand Families became open warfare, there would be a desperate struggle over the Imperial Navy and other military facilities. The patronage networks would turn on each other, fighting a desperate war to secure control of the ships and orbital fortresses. Tiberius knew that the family had thousands of men and women in

key positions, but he also knew that the other families had their own clients. There was no way to know who would come out ahead when the shit hit the fan.

His scowl deepened. They'd been running out of room to expand easily long before the rebellion at Jackson's Folly. If the rebels had waited another fifty years, the Empire might have ripped itself apart and saved them the trouble.

"Openly, we intend to fight," he said. "Covertly, I want you both to serve as ambassadors to the rebels. If we win, well and good; if we lose, I want to ensure that the family's position is not badly compromised."

"I don't see how we can avoid being compromised," Gwendolyn pointed out, tartly. "The rebels want our heads, preferably not attached to our bodies."

"They will have to govern after winning the war," Tiberius countered. "If they wanted wanton destruction, Earth would be uninhabitable by now. We can ensure a reasonably peaceful transition of power… or force them to rebuild the Empire from scratch."

"Risky," Pompey observed. He gave Tiberius a long considering glance. "I dare say the Families Council will not be happy about us going behind their backs."

"They'll be doing the same," Tiberius predicted, dismissively. "However, we have an unfair advantage. I expect you" — he looked directly at Gwendolyn — "to take full advantage of it."

Gwendolyn gave him a charming smile. "You place your faith in my powers of seduction?"

Tiberius produced a datachip from his pocket and dropped it on the desk. "Jason Cordova, Hero of the Underground, is a *Cicero*," he said. It had taken his father plenty of time, money and effort to bury the truth, but it had all paid off. "And if family loyalty isn't enough to gain his assistance, we know something else about him. We know a single detail that will shatter his position beyond repair."

Pompey frowned. "If that is true," he said, "the secret would be *years* out of date."

"Trust me," Tiberius said. It had shocked him when he'd opened the sealed file, despite considering himself prepared for anything. "This secret will never grow old."

Chapter Three

Captain Penelope Quick — Penny to her friends and enemies alike — stared down at her hands, fighting to control the shaking. Two weeks in Imperial Intelligence's Luna Holding Facility had been far from pleasant, even before the Mind Techs had submitted her to their interrogation procedures. Torture and beatings would have been kinder. Instead, metallic fingers had pried their way into her mind, extracting every last fragment of information from her skull. By the time they had conceded — reluctantly — that she had been telling the truth all along, the experience had damaged her mind.

Her throat hurt from screaming. That, at least, was a tangible pain. Worse, perhaps, were the ghostly delusions of broken bones, or invisible flames scorching her skin. The guards hadn't seemed to care when she curled up in her cell, shaking helplessly as her tortured mind tormented her. Even afterwards, the memories still took their toll on her. She doubted she would ever stop shaking, no matter what she did. It had been a surprise when they had taken her out of the cell, told her to wash and dress, then placed her on a shuttle. Her new commanding officer, it seemed, was waiting for her.

She crept over to the porthole and stared into the inky blackness of interplanetary space. It was rare for a spacer to be a claustrophobe — no one who served in the Imperial Navy could be afraid of tight spaces — but Penny no longer felt comfortable in the shuttle. She had a feeling that it would be worse on the starship, even though it was probably a superdreadnaught. The Mind Techs had done untold damage to her mind, then simply let her go. Part of her wondered if they had expected to have custody of her until her mind finally gave out. They certainly hadn't bothered to provide any treatment for the damage they'd inflicted…

Her hands started to tremble again. Angrily, she glared down at them, then looked back out of the porthole as the superdreadnaught came into view. Like all *General*-class superdreadnaughts, *General Clive* was five kilometres long, a blunt hammer of a starship studded with sensor blisters, missile tubes and energy weapons. A dozen smaller starships held close station around her hull, several of them modified light cruisers. The rebels, she knew, had converted bulk freighters into arsenal ships, giving them a colossal throw weight in the first broadside. Her new commander, whoever he was, had put her recommendation of increasing the number of escorting starships into practice. It wouldn't be perfect, she knew, but it would give the superdreadnaught a chance to survive.

A dull shiver ran through the shuttle as it passed through the

superdreadnaught's shields, then the force field holding her atmosphere inside the shuttlebay. Penny felt her legs tremble, moments before the shuttle touched down on the deck. Gritting her teeth, she stood up and walked over to the hatch, catching sight of her reflection as she passed a display screen. She looked awful. Her long hair had been cut short to allow the Mind Techs to attach their tools, while her eyes were surrounded by dark rings that told of a lack of sleep. And her eyes themselves looked haunted…

I told them everything, she thought, remembering her desperate attempts to convince her interrogators that she was telling the truth. But they hadn't wanted to believe her. *I told them everything and they still tore my mind to shreds*.

The hatch opened; she jumped backwards, feeling a flash of panic. Outside, a single young woman waited, wearing an Ensign's uniform. Penny couldn't help noticing — with a flicker of envy — that it was a standard uniform, without any of the careful tailoring that some commanding officers insisted on. Percival had insisted that all of his female subordinates wear uniforms intended to show off their bodies.

She staggered and almost fell as the memory overwhelmed her. The Ensign reached out for her… and Penny jumped, almost lashing out at the young woman. Penny barely heard her questions, then her urgent call to sickbay. The deck suddenly seemed warm and comforting…

The next thing she knew was that she was in sickbay, with two concerned faces looking down at her. One of them wore the standard white uniform of a naval doctor, the other wore the black uniform of an Admiral. Penny cringed away from him, her memories bubbling up inside her skull. Her head suddenly began to hurt badly, a dull throbbing that made it hard to control her thoughts.

"I cannot imagine what they were thinking," the doctor was saying. Penny fought to listen to her, even though her ears seemed to be failing. "There's little physical damage, but the mental damage will take weeks or months of recovery before she can even *consider* returning to duty."

"I think there aren't many people with direct experience of the rebels," the Admiral said. He might have been wearing the same uniform as Percival, but he certainly *sounded* more competent. But then, Percival was not a skilled commanding officer. Was he even still alive? Penny had no idea how the Battle of Camelot had ended. "They probably thought the same."

Penny looked up as the doctor pressed something metallic against her skull. There was a faint hiss, followed by a numbing sensation that was a welcome relief, after the pain. Penny almost sagged, her eyelids

suddenly very heavy, before she forced herself to sit upright. The doctor eyed her with concern, then held out a glass of water. Penny sipped gratefully.

"My very strong advice," the doctor said, "would be to take it easy for the next few months."

"I don't think that will be possible," Penny said. It took her four tries to say the sentence properly. "They wanted to blame me."

"They won't be blaming you," the Admiral said. He gave her a thoughtful look. "The record — and the data they took from your mind — indicates that it was all Percival's fault. As the Roosevelt Family is currently in deep shit, it seems unlikely that anyone will actually bother to try to save his reputation."

"Good," Penny said, after a moment. "Is he alive?"

"We don't know," the Admiral told her. "The rebels might well have killed him."

"Good," Penny said, shortly. Once, such words would have earned her a court martial; now, she no longer cared. "I hope the bastard rots in hell."

The Admiral gave her a droll smile. It took her a moment to realise that he not only agreed with her, he wasn't shy about making it known either. Oddly, the sight made her want to cry. What would she have been able to do if she had served under an Admiral who had been more interested in his job than sex?

"ONI feels that you should be assigned to my command," the Admiral said, after a moment of silent reflection. "Under the circumstances, I would understand if you wish to remain in sickbay…"

"No," Penny said, shortly. The pain would be back soon, she was sure, but she wanted to see what it was like working with a *competent* Admiral. Besides, if she seemed useless, the best she could hope for was a dishonourable discharge. She wouldn't be able to afford treatments for mental damage after being kicked out of the navy. "I can work under you."

"I hope you're right," the Admiral said. He stuck out a hand. Penny grasped it and shook, firmly. "I am Admiral Wachter."

Penny blinked in surprise. Admiral Wachter was a *legend*! But who else would be selected to defend the Empire?

"They have inflicted considerable trauma on your mind," the doctor informed her, sharply. "So far, there has been only limited physical damage, but that might not matter. I expect you to come back here as soon as you feel anything, even a mild headache. In fact, I want you to sleep here for the next few weeks. That will allow me to monitor your condition."

Penny opened her mouth to object, then changed her mind. She had always enjoyed having a cabin of her own, a place to retreat from

the universe, but the doctor was right. If she wanted to heal, she would need medical attention and constant supervision. Somehow, she had the feeling that the Admiral would be unhappy if she *didn't* seek help when she needed it.

She stood upright. Her legs seemed stable, although she suspected that it wouldn't be long before they were trembling again. She wasn't even sure *why* her body was shaking in the first place. Her interrogators hadn't physically hurt her, apart from strapping her down to the bed.

"Come with me," the Admiral said. "But don't hesitate to call for help if you need it."

The interior of the *General Clive* was plain, almost Spartan. Penny had served on starships that had been decorated to suit their commander's personal tastes, but the superdreadnaught's CO didn't seem to have bothered. Or perhaps he or she believed that simplicity was best, which had the added advantage of allowing the crew access to the superdreadnaught's innards. There was an old story about a CO's artworks that had blocked access to a damaged component, years ago, and of how the entire ship had had to be scrapped. Penny suspected that there was some element of truth in the tale.

She felt an odd sense of relief as she stepped onto the flag deck and looked up at the giant holographic display dominating the compartment. The superdreadnaught was surrounded twenty-six other superdreadnaughts and nearly four hundred smaller ships, all holding a tight formation. Judging by the display, the tactical crews were holding near-constant exercises, practicing desperately to defend against a missile swarm. It didn't look as though they were succeeding, but they were clearly out of practice. They'd get better in time.

"Take a seat," the Admiral said. "Tell me what you make of this."

Penny sat, gratefully, and watched as he tapped a switch, replacing the tactical display with an interstellar star chart. The rebels seemed to hold hundreds of stars, mainly concentrated on Sector 117. Penny reminded herself, savagely, that the information was almost certainly months out of date. Without any way of sending messages faster-than-light, the Empire was dependent on news brought back by starships… and it took months to get a message from the edge of the Empire to Earth. The rebels might easily have advanced closer to Earth in the time it had taken for Earth to even know that there had been a rebellion.

"They're going to be coming for Earth," she said, finally. Sector 117, thanks to the Roosevelt Family, had a functional industrial base. The rebels wouldn't have hesitated to press it into service, aided and abetted by workers who hated their masters with a fierce passion.

“And they’re going to be coming soon.”

“Precisely the conclusion drawn by the Grand Admiral’s tactical staff,” the Admiral said. He gave her a smile that made her smile back. “Our objective is to stop the rebels at Morrison, then push them back and ultimately defeat their forces. This is not going to be easy.”

Penny couldn’t disagree. Admiral Percival had been the worst possible commanding officer for Sector 117, a man more interested in maintaining his position and enjoying his pleasures than actually fighting. The rebels had run rings round him, then eventually captured his home base and the supplies stockpiled there. By now, the rebels were strong enough that a major fleet deployment would be required to stop them, which would draw down the forces elsewhere. And that, in turn, would encourage other uprisings against the Empire.

She had no illusions about the Empire’s popularity outside the Core Worlds. It had none. There were countless planets groaning under the weight of taxes, even when they weren’t being directly exploited by one of the Thousand Families. The only thing saving the Empire from a general uprising had been the willingness to apply force to stamp on rebels and the lack of a united rebel front. Now, the force had been discredited and the rebels *did* have a leader. She couldn’t help feeling that the war was going to push the Empire right to the limit.

“I had hoped to set out within the week,” Admiral Wachter continued. “As it is, we are having to bring these superdreadnaughts up to scratch and train new crews — crews often taken from merchant ships. I dare say they’re unhappy.”

Penny winced. There was legal precedent for conscripting merchant crews when the Imperial Navy was short on crewmen — quite a few merchantmen had naval experience — but it was never very popular. Most of the conscripted had *left* the Navy because they disliked working under military discipline and corrupt superiors. Bringing them back onboard was asking for trouble.

“There are millions of naval personal on Luna,” the Admiral continued. “Millions of them. And do you know how many have the experience of actually working on a starship? Only a handful.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ll be lucky if we leave within a month,” he added. “And then we will have to worry about internal security, *without* the damned Blackshirts.”

“Yes, sir,” Penny agreed.

That, at least, was something she wouldn’t mourn. The Blackshirts were trained and conditioned to be garrison troops, ready to commit atrocities at the drop of a hat. Looting and rape were the perks of the job, although Penny rather doubted they made up for losing a chunk of their minds. But putting the Blackshirts on starships had been

asking for trouble. They didn't have the experience to keep themselves safe or the restraint to keep from hurting innocent crewmen.

"I was planning to have you kick ass at Luna Base and get them to assign us more experienced crewmen," the Admiral informed her. "But you're not in any shape for a proper argument. Instead, I want you to start devising tactical problems based on what you've seen from the rebels. Make sure you give them as many advantages as possible."

Penny nodded. Tactical simulations — the ones that weren't planned out in advance — frequently gave the enemy advantages that they shouldn't have in real life. Missile broadsides might be larger, individual missiles might be faster; in theory, practicing against a stronger opponent was good practice for fighting a *real* enemy. But most live-fire exercises were carefully planned to ensure the right side won. Nothing was left to chance.

She smiled. Maybe Admiral Wachter would insist on holding a random exercise, inviting his subordinates to actually *compete.* It might teach them more than they'd learn otherwise.

"After that, I want you to start thinking about what other surprises the rebels might come up with," the Admiral added. "I suspect that they will have full access to the Geeks and Nerds — they've always been trying to push the limits of the possible. What else might they be able to devise to give themselves an unfair advantage?"

Penny considered it. Arsenal ships weren't a *real* innovation — she had no doubt that the ships could be duplicated — but the Admiral was right. The Geeks had always pushed the limits and the rebels had every interest in encouraging them. After all, they *knew* that they were still massively outgunned by the Empire. If they could come up with something completely new, it might prove disastrous.

And the Empire, as a general rule, didn't encourage innovation. Why should it, Penny asked, when the Thousand Families already had everything they wanted? But there were always scientists trying to push the limits, no matter what discouragement was thrown at them. The Geeks might just have a lead on the Empire.

"Yes, sir," she said, again. She looked up at the holographic display, silently calculating ship transit times. The rebels would have to knock out a dozen bases before they reached Morrison, she suspected. "I won't let you down."

Admiral Wachter reached out and squeezed her shoulder. If Percival had done it, she knew, it would have been unpleasant. But Admiral Wachter seemed genuinely supportive.

"I know you won't," he assured her. "Have fun."

* * *

Compared to Percival, Penny decided over the following weeks, Admiral Wachter was a brilliant commanding officer. The cynical side of her mind pointed out that *anyone* would seem brilliant compared to Percival, but it seemed harder and harder to maintain her detachment when the Admiral was genuinely caring. He didn't object to her occasional trips to sickbay; he even ensured she had enough time to recover every time she suffered a panic attack.

It wasn't just her, too. The Admiral cared for the entire crew. He might have conscripted men and women, but he'd ensured that they didn't simply vanish into the Navy. They had permission to send messages to their families, collect their pay and all the other little details that made it easier for them to settle in. Penny still worried about a mutiny, particularly among the conscripts, but nothing materialised. But then, there were few places less conductive to a mutiny than Earth.

Home Fleet was not in good shape, she realised, after she started reading the reports from the Admiral's repair crews. Half of the superdreadnaughts had real problems going to full power, let alone leaving the Sol System. The smaller ships were in better state, but a number of ships in the reserve were effectively nothing more than dead hulks. They'd been cannibalised to keep the other ships functional.

"It will be worse at Morrison," Admiral Wachter predicted, as they made their final preparations for departure. Several repairs would have to be carried out while the ships were in flight. "But at least we can purge officers there. Their patrons will be hundreds of light years away. By the time they find out their clients have been purged, it will be too late."

Penny smiled. After years spent wrestling with the supply department under Percival, she couldn't wait. The bureaucrats were in for a nasty surprise.

Chapter Four

"I think they're on the alert."

Commodore Adeeba Hamil nodded in agreement as the light freighter drifted towards the giant station orbiting Mars. The Imperial Navy had deployed several squadrons of light cruisers to screen the planet, with a squadron of superdreadnaughts in reserve. Others, according to the civilian-grade sensors mounted on the freighter, were gathering near Jupiter, preparing to go to war.

"It looks that way," she said. Colin would have to be warned of the enemy formation, but they wouldn't be going back to Jackson's Folly for months. "Are you sure we can get down to Mars?"

"As long as the DNA reprofiling worked, you should be fine," the smuggler assured him. He'd introduced himself as Fred, when they'd made contact at the independent asteroid; he'd assured them that it was easier to reach Earth by contacting the underground on Mars. "If it didn't…"

He let her fill out the rest of the details for herself. Adeeba had been a Commander in the Imperial Navy — and one of the original mutineers at Jackson's Folly. Her DNA pattern was registered within the Navy's databanks, along with everyone else who had ever even considered joining the Navy. If the reprofiling had failed, she would be caught the moment the inspectors tested her DNA. And, at that point, the implants in her head would kill her.

"I'm sure we'll be fine," she said. She'd always been happier on the command deck of a starship, but there were only a handful of rebels with any experience of Earth. Colin hadn't had many choices when the time came to pick envoys to Earth's underground. "And if we're not, you can plead innocent and pay bribes."

"Maybe," Fred groused. "But I will be in deep shit anyway."

Adeeba nodded, running her hand through her long dark hair. She'd grown up on Earth, experiencing enough along the way to convince her that the Empire was neither fair nor reasonable when it felt that it's security was threatened. Fred would probably be held responsible for shipping them to Mars, even if he hadn't had the slightest idea who they were or what they represented. It wasn't just her and Neil who were at risk, but the Mars Underground itself.

She looked up as Colonel Neil Frandsen entered the compartment. The Marine was trying to slouch, but it wasn't working very well. There was no mistaking the extensive discipline that had been hammered into the former Imperial Marine, or the fact he was a very dangerous and experienced man. Like Adeeba, he'd seen the dark side of the Empire and had been unable to remain silent. And, just like her,

he was risking a fate worse than death if they were caught.

"I've got our papers ready," Frandsen informed her. "Everything has been checked and checked again."

"Just don't forget your lines," Fred advised them, as the freighter advanced towards the station. "One mistake, right now, and they will interrogate you extensively. Unless, of course, you pay them a bribe."

Adeeba rolled her eyes. Mars was humanity's oldest colony world, home to nearly five *billion* humans, most of them living in the teeming rat warrens under the terraformed landscape. Like Earth, corruption and decay were a fact of life. There was so much competition between the families that ran the planet that there was no room for the ordinary citizens to gain power, let alone independence. No wonder, she decided, that there was an underground on Mars.

She couldn't help feeling nervous as the freighter finally docked with the station, but all her fears seemed groundless. The customs officer barely even glanced at them; he ran their IDs through the central processor, checked their DNA and then impatiently waved them through the security door and into the station. Adeeba kept her face expressionless as they walked into the throng of visitors, then found their way to the space elevator. Four hours later, they were on Mars.

Robinson City was odd, even by the Empire's standards. It was composed of a series of giant domes, each one housing those wealthy enough to have surface homes, built on top of a warren that dated all the way back to the first settlements on Mars. Most of the locals in the warren seemed drab, almost completely colourless; the ethnic groups that had settled Mars, centuries ago, had long since blended together into something unique to the red planet. She wasn't even sure how to tell the difference between the different occupations. The only people who seemed obvious were the prostitutes.

"We had to fight our way through a set of warrens once," Frandsen said, once they found a room. The landlady took cash and asked no questions, even though it was obvious that neither of them came from Mars. "Even finding our way was tricky."

Adeeba nodded in understanding. The warren didn't seem to have street names, corridor designations or anything else that might help an outsider find their way around. Somehow, she suspected that it would be easy to get lost if they walked further underground. She remembered what she'd been told by Fred, before they flickered into the Sol System, and scowled. Finding the underground would be easy. Convincing the underground that they could be trusted would be hard.

They went out for dinner, finding a small eatery several corridors away from their rented room. The food was bland, utterly tasteless.

Adeeba ate it anyway — naval rations were worse — and then followed Frandsen through a twisting series of corridors. She hoped the Marine was better at keeping track of where they were going, she decided, as they reached a warehouse on the lower levels. If they got split up, she knew she would never find her way back to the surface.

"Halt," a voice ordered, as they stepped into the warehouse. "Keep your hands where we can see them."

Adeeba winced, inwardly. The warehouse was dark. She couldn't see the speaker. Carefully, she lifted her hands, then swallowed hard. Making contact was always dangerous, she'd been warned. They might just be about to walk right into Imperial Intelligence's waiting arms.

"We come from Tamerlane, selling quality," she said. It was their official excuse for visiting Mars, but it was also a code phrase from the underground. "And we need to see the Big Man."

"Indeed," the voice sneered. "Put your bags on the floor — gently — then get undressed."

Adeeba exchanged glances with Frandsen, then placed the bag on the floor and pulled off her shirt, followed rapidly by her trousers. Whatever body modesty she'd once possessed had been lost by years in the Navy, where close quarters — often unisex quarters — were common. Even so, she hesitated before removing her bra and panties and dropping them on the dusty ground. They were both completely naked — and vulnerable.

A light flicked on, revealing two separate doors. "Girl, go to the left," the voice ordered, coldly. There was no hint of any emotion in its tone. "Boy, go to the right. We have to scan you both thoroughly."

The examination was as uncomfortable as Adeeba had feared, although the two grim-faced women who examined her were surprisingly professional. They checked her implants carefully, reluctantly conceded that she wasn't carrying anything dangerous, then pushed her through a second door. Inside, there was a tall man carrying a pair of dressing gowns. He passed one of them to Adeeba and she donned it, gratefully. A moment later, Frandsen joined them. Adeeba couldn't help staring at his scars before he pulled his own gown on, concealing his body.

"This way," the man said.

He led them into a smaller room, a makeshift office. A dark-skinned man was sitting on a packing crate, waiting for them. He stood up, nodded politely to them both, then indicated that they should sit on crates themselves. A small pot of tea, bubbling in the corner, let out a low whistle. The man poured three mugs of tea — it was tradition on Mars, Adeeba recalled — and handed them out, then sat down facing them.

“You can call me the Big Man,” he said. His accent was noticeably from Mars, although it was exaggerated enough to make her wonder if it were an act. The man’s face was bland enough to suggest genetic modification. Chances were he could vanish quickly into the warrens if Imperial Security or the Blackshirts came after him. “And you’re from the rebellion.”

“Yes,” Adeeba said, shortly. “We need your help to get to Earth.”

“So I hear,” the Big Man said. “And that leads to a simple question. Can you guarantee that the Empire will be overthrown?”

Adeeba hesitated, composing her reply. “We can offer no guarantees,” she said, carefully. “However, with your help, we have a greater chance of success.”

“That is true,” the Big Man agreed. “However, we are also very vulnerable. If we stage an uprising on Mars — or Earth — we may well be crushed. The Imps will control the high orbitals. Somehow, I don’t think they will have many qualms about bombarding Mars, let alone Earth.”

“Probably not,” Adeeba said. “They will certainly react harshly to any challenge to their authority.”

“Also true,” the Big Man said. “So tell me. Why should we assist you?”

Frandsen leaned forward. “Aren’t you committed to overthrowing the Empire?”

“There’s a difference between taking brave steps and committing suicide,” the Big Man pointed out. If he was offended by Frandsen’s tone, he didn’t show it. “The point remains that we are massively outgunned, on both Earth and Mars. I will not throw lives away for no good reason.”

“We are not asking you to rebel at once,” Adeeba said. “Like you said, it would be useless — and futile. We want you to do two things for us. First, we want you to prepare for the day we attack the Sol System, so you can be ready to rise up then. Second, we want you to help sabotage the Empire’s war effort. You have, I believe, access to some bureaucrats in the logistics section?”

“A few,” the Big Man said, without committing himself. “There are others on Earth with more connections.”

He shrugged. “And what are you prepared to offer in exchange?”

“You should already be able to obtain weapons,” Frandsen said. “I can offer military training for men and women who are willing to fight.”

“Training we can get, if we need it,” the Big Man said. He looked at them both for a long moment. “And what sort of universe do you envisage taking shape after the Thousand Bastards are defeated?”

Adeeba smiled. Colin had given her very specific instructions for

when that point was raised.

"Mars will gain autonomy," she said, simply. "You will be responsible for your own affairs, without any interference from the Empire. You will send elected representatives to Parliament on Earth to debate the overall course of the Empire, like the other worlds."

The Big Man lifted an eyebrow. Parliament was a joke, everyone knew, a thin gloss of legality covering the naked power wielded by the Thousand Families. MPs might have been democratically elected once; now, they were effectively picked at random by the Thousand Families. There was so little power in Parliament that even the damned patronage system barely touched the MPs. Some of the candidates, Colin had once observed, were selected for amusement value and nothing else.

"We believe that a democratically-elected Parliament will have more ability to reflect the wishes of the Empire's population than anything else," Adeeba explained. She understood the man's doubts, but the rebels hadn't been able to come up with a better idea. "There will also be checks and balances in place."

"Mars has a small population, compared to Earth," the Big Man said. "What is to stop Earth from outvoting us?"

"Each planet will have one representative," Adeeba said. "Earth won't have more votes than Mars."

"I could see that working, I suppose," the Big Man said. "And what if I wanted support against other factions on Mars?"

Adeeba winced. They'd expected the question, sooner or later, but anticipation didn't make it any easier. One of the reasons the various undergrounds had never united against the Empire was a simple failure to agree on a common goal. Some factions wanted to take power for themselves, others wanted to split the Empire up into smaller power groups… and still others had darker motives. Imperial Intelligence, according to the files they'd recovered on Camelot, had been encouraging infighting among the rebel groups for centuries. As long as the rebels were fighting each other, they weren't a threat to the Empire.

"We are not going to take sides," she said, seriously. If they supported one faction, others might unite against them — or simply tip off the security forces. "Our objective is the destruction of the Empire. We can fight over what comes afterwards once the Empire is gone."

The Big Man smiled. "Understandable," he said. "I will provide you both with transport to Earth and an introduction to friends of mine on the surface. I trust that will be enough, for the moment? I'd prefer not to go into detail about other steps."

Frandsen leaned forward. "How do you propose to get us to

Earth?"

"They monitor passengers coming and going from the planet," the Big Man said. He winked at them. "They don't pay as much attention to shipping crates. The ride will be uncomfortable, but safe enough."

Unless someone tips them off, Adeeba thought, coldly. There would be thousands of starships unloading in Earth orbit every day. No one could inspect *all* of the crates before they were sent down to the surface. A few bribes would make sure of that, she suspected, if the security officers looked resolute. They'd been warned that the underground had strong ties with criminal organisations. It was the only way to survive.

"Thank you," she said. "When do we leave?"

The Big Man grinned. "Did you leave anything in your room?"

Adeeba shook her head. She would have been surprised if he hadn't had the room searched while they were eating dinner. The underground had only survived through extreme paranoia and careful precautions. They'd only brought a couple of small bags with them, containing nothing more than a pair of datapads and changes of clothes. By now, both of the bags would have been thoroughly searched too.

"Then you can leave at once," the Big Man said. "We'll give you sleeping pills once you're inside the crate. I'd suggest taking them. It will take at least nineteen hours for you to reach Earth and it will not be a comfortable trip. And we daren't give you anything electronic."

"We're prefer to stay awake," Frandsen said. "Can you give us a book or two?"

The Big Man smiled. "Of course," he said. "And good luck."

Adeeba scowled. There was another good reason not to go to sleep. If someone *had* tipped off Imperial Intelligence, they would wake up in a prison cell with their implants deactivated — or they would not wake up at all.

* * *

As it happened, the trip was not as bad as they had feared. Adeeba had been confined in smaller spaces than the crate; the handful of blankets they'd been given were enough to lie on, even when the crate was shipped up the orbital elevator and then loaded into a starship for transport. There was some shaking, then the brief sensation of flickering through interplanetary space, followed by more shaking. Adeeba found herself nodding off in the middle of the trip; Frandsen grinned at her, then volunteered to take watch while she slept.

They both snapped awake as they felt someone opening the crate. The lid fell off a moment later, revealing two tired-looking faces peering down at them. Moments later, the side was opened, allowing them both to step out of the crate. Maintenance uniforms were shoved at them; they donned them rapidly, then followed the underground men out of the new warehouse and through a series of darkened corridors. None of the security officers even looked twice at them.

And the atmosphere was very definitely *Earth's*… a faint combination of human sweat and blood, hints of pollution and something indefinably homelike.

"We've put aside a room for you," one of their escorts grunted, as they reached a set of doors. "This is Earth. You are expected to remain inside until we call for you."

"We understand," Frandsen said. The underground would know more about sneaking around than the outsiders, even though both of them had actually been born on Earth. "Do you have food for us."

"There is food inside, and water too," the man said. "But remain inside. We dare not lose you now."

The room was actually bigger than the tiny apartment Adeeba remembered from Earth, although it was smaller than her quarters on the battlecruiser she'd commanded. She allowed herself a smile as the door closed, leaving them alone. They'd made it! She watched silently as Frandsen checked for bugs, then reported the presence of a handful of optical and audio pickups scattered around the room. It didn't look as if anyone had made an effort to *hide* the bugs.

This is Earth, she thought. The Empire tried hard to monitor its citizens. No one had any right to privacy. It was one of the many reasons she had to hate the Empire. Colin's reasons had started out personal and become general; hers were general, which had then become personal. *They do things differently here*.

"We had better get some rest," Frandsen said. "And…"

He tapped his lips, turning his head so the bugs couldn't catch his movement. Adeeba understood; they didn't dare deactivate the bugs, even though it was unlikely that anyone was watching them personally. They couldn't afford to attract attention. All they could do was wait for the underground to make contact.

Shaking her head, she walked over to the bed and lay down.

Chapter Five

"It is done," Major Vincent Anderson reported.

Colin nodded, not looking away from the view of the stars — and the Shadow Fleet, gathered around his flagship. It was strange to feel guilty after everything he'd done, from breaking his sworn oaths to the Imperial Navy to sending people to their deaths in his name, but he couldn't help feeling bad. And yet there had been no choice. Commodore Quigley could have torn the Popular Front apart.

He'd been unpopular among his crews — and among his superiors, which was unusual. Even Admiral Percival, never a very good judge of character, had refused to grant him further promotion, something that had clearly rankled. The Commodore had been as ambitious as Colin himself and much less moral. By the time his squadron heard of the mutinies and the rebellion, he'd clearly been planning something for himself. Instead, he'd simply taken his squadron and defected to the rebels.

And then the trouble started, Colin reflected. *He wasn't popular. We would have had another mutiny on our hands.*

He'd been unsure what to do. The Shadow Fleet could hardly refuse reinforcements, but he couldn't allow Quigley any power, not when his own squadron was on the verge of mutiny — a second mutiny, from the Empire's point of view. In the end, he'd accepted Anderson's suggestion. Quigley was fond of flying his own shuttle. It had been simple enough to arrange an 'accident' that had destroyed the shuttle, taking the wretched Commodore with it.

"Make sure no one ever finds out what happened," Colin ordered. The Shadow Fleet had expanded rapidly as more and more mutineers brought their ships to join the formation. Few of them knew Colin, even by reputation. He couldn't afford his subordinates having doubts about him, not when they had to take the offensive. "We can't even afford rumours."

He scowled. Admiral Percival had had legitimate authority behind him, even though he'd been a bastard of the first rank. Contemplating Percival's new life on the penal colony was a thought that definitely kept him warm at night. But Colin found it harder to maintain his authority; he'd mutinied against his superiors, why couldn't his subordinates mutiny against him? If they thought that Colin was actively purging the ranks of unwanted officers and crew…

"I did the work myself," Anderson assured him. The Security Officer, who had proved his loyalty to the rebellion by not alerting Percival when he'd first detected signs that a mutiny was planned, stepped closer. "There is nothing left to suggest that it was anything

other than a tragic accident."

"Let's hope so," Colin said. He took one last look out at the gathering fleet, then turned and strode towards the hatch. "Is everything prepared for the meeting?"

"I believe so," Anderson said. "Are we finally ready to take the offensive?"

Colin scowled. Several sectors had fallen into rebel hands like ripe fruit, simply because the Imperial Navy had never bothered to station anything larger than a light cruiser to defend them. However, the region of space they occupied was finally starting to brush up against worlds and sectors that were quite heavily defended. Some of the defended worlds could be bypassed and isolated, at least until the war was won or lost; others, he knew, had to be reduced before the rebels could drive on Earth.

"I hope so," he said. "The bastards still have vast firepower under their command, vastly more firepower than us. We can't give them too much time to recover."

He led the way into the conference room, feeling an odd sense of satisfaction as his subordinates — and the handful of political representatives — rose to their feet. It was the sort of respect he'd wanted when he'd served the Empire, back when he'd been naive enough to believe that a talented man without connections could succeed. But Percival had destroyed both his hopes and his faith in the Empire. Colin wondered, absently, just how Percival was coping on the penal world. The files agreed that half the convicts dumped on the surface died within the first six months.

"Please, be seated," he said, taking his seat at the head of the table. They sat down and gazed at him expectantly. "It has been five months since we secured Camelot, five months during which we have prepared for the offensive against Earth. We dare not wait any longer."

They were an odd group, he told himself. Former Imperial Navy officers, like himself; rebels from a dozen planets or hidden asteroid settlements… and Jason Cordova, who looked, as always, larger than life. The man who had refused to scorch a planet on the Empire's command and then fled into the Beyond with his ship, rather than return to face judgement — and certain death. Colin rather admired him, although there were times he doubted Cordova's common sense. After so long in the Beyond, the man might well not be completely sane any longer.

Beside him, Hannelore Ellicott-Chatham looked nervous. Unlike most of the rebels, she had been an aristocrat who had set up an independent mining company of her own before it had been captured by Cordova. Now, she was working as a supply officer — she was

genuinely talented, Colin had to admit — and Cordova's lover. The evil part of Colin's mind wondered which occupation was more demanding.

Commodore Jeremy Damiani sat next to Colin himself, his face expressionless. He'd worked for Stacy Roosevelt before she'd lost her superdreadnaughts to the rebels, then switched sides without a second thought. Colin knew that Damiani was reliable; he had good reason to be grateful for Stacy refusing to leave him in command of her ships. If he'd been in command, the rebellion might have ended there and then. But now he was a loyal rebel…

Colin pushed the thought aside as he faced the group. "The Empire will know about us now," he said. His most optimistic calculations suggested that Earth would have known about the rebellion for at least two weeks, although he knew better than to rely on it. It was quite possible that *someone* on Percival's staff had reported accurately to his patron, even though Percival himself had tried to keep a lid on the news. "Right now, they will be mobilising to confront us. They will have no choice."

He looked from face to face, willing them to understand. Already, between the Geeks and thousands of talented workers who had finally been allowed to use their talents, the rebel-controlled industrial nodes were working miracles. Given ten years, Colin suspected, the Shadow Fleet would be able to roll over the Empire with ease. But they didn't *have* ten years, not when the Empire was now well aware of the threat. The Thousand Families wouldn't dare let a challenge to their power go unanswered.

Colin had no illusions, even though he knew — better than most — the true condition of the naval reserve. The starships and formations along the border had been forced to run regular maintenance cycles, but bases closer to Earth had been allowed to grow lax. Corruption had set in; starships had been pillaged for components that could be sold to civilians. There were entire squadrons that only existed on paper. But, given time, the Empire could still put together a formidable challenge…

And, if it geared up for all-out war, it would easily be able to out-produce the rebels.

"We will divide our offensive into three formations," Colin continued. He'd hashed out the plan himself, then consulted a handful of subordinates. This was the first time he'd presented it to the entire council. "The Main Strike Fleet, under my command, will advance towards Morrison, where we will attempt to reduce and occupy the naval base. As Morrison is likely to be their staging base for any counterattacks, depriving the Imperial Navy of the base's facilities will be a crippling blow."

He paused, scowling at the holographic star chart. A *competent* enemy commander would understand that Morrison had to be held — or give up any thoughts of a counterattack for several years — but who knew who he'd be facing? Another Percival… or someone more competent? Colin had nothing, apart from contempt, for the Thousand Families, but they did sometimes produce competent officers and administrators. The question rattled around and around in his mind, receiving no answer. Who would he be facing?

"The Deep Strike Fleet, under Commodore Damiani, will be advancing ahead of the Main Strike Fleet, raiding planetary defences and orbital installations," Colin said. "This serves two purposes; it will confuse the enemy about our ultimate intentions and create political pressure for the Imperial Navy to defend the targeted worlds. If we're lucky, they will spread out their forces to cover potential targets. Even if they don't, they will have to cope with the political fallout from losing the worlds and installations."

Colin smiled, coldly. He had never claimed to be an expert in economics, but rebel analysts had tried hard to predict what would happen when the Roosevelt Family finally collapsed. Their best-case projection suggested that the other families would manage to take their assets for themselves, preventing the collapse from spreading further, yet it would place even more strain on the Empire. And, if they couldn't prevent the collapse from spreading, the Empire might find it impossible to pay for the war.

"Finally, the Deep Raid Fleet, under Captain Cordova, will raid shipping and other isolated targets within the Core Worlds," Colin concluded. "This will not only force them to divert additional forces to cover convoys, it will create a sense of unease among their leadership. If we can reach out and touch the Core Worlds, what's to say we can't reach out and touch Earth itself?

"I won't lie to you. The Empire still has a staggering advantage in firepower — and we will be going up against tough fixed defences, no matter how badly corruption has eroded their ability to fight. We could still lose — but the Empire's self-confidence will not survive."

There was a long pause. Only a handful knew about the secret mission to Earth, let alone the plans for coordinated action with the underground movements. He didn't dare discuss that openly, not when news might spread through the fleet and into unfriendly ears. There were so many newcomers that it was quite likely that some of them were reporting back to the Empire. And besides, they'd never figured out how the Empire had managed to locate Sanctuary Asteroid.

Finally, he nodded to Salgak.

The Geek's voice buzzed as he spoke, drawing attention to the

metal implants that marred his pale flesh. Such augmentation was banned in the Empire, even for the upper classes; the Geeks wore their implants proudly, as a badge of honour. Colin honestly couldn't imagine why anyone would augment themselves so heavily it was questionable if they were *human* any longer, unless it was a gesture of defiance. The Empire wouldn't hesitate to kill any scientist who started pushing the limits of research and development.

"We have turned our missile production facilities over to the Popular Front," the Geek stated, bluntly. "Instead, we have worked on improving the missile systems and developing new weapons and technologies. We have managed to improve the performance of standard shipkiller missiles in several different ways. One of them will give the missiles additional powered flight range."

Colin smiled. That wouldn't be too useful against enemy starships — the standard tactic against an overwhelming barrage of missiles was to flicker out — but it would be very useful when they confronted fixed defences. Orbital fortresses weren't much larger than superdreadnaughts, yet they had no need to devote mass to drives, allowing them to stockpile far more missiles in their hulls. Being able to engage them outside their own effective range would definitely give the enemy a nasty surprise.

"Another modification will make the missiles effective against enemy drive systems," Salgak stated. "However, we are unable to produce them except in very small numbers. It requires a degree of precision that standard shipyards and industrial nodes are incapable of duplicating. There are also problems with the arming systems; the missiles may have to be fired from very short range, if they are to be completely effective.

"In hopes of tackling this problem, we have been designing a modified gunboat that we hope will be able to launch one or two such missiles. However, cramming drives, shields and weapons into a gunboat hull is tricky. We may have better luck if we leave the flicker drive out, then minimise everything else."

"The gunboats would not be able to retreat," Damiani pointed out, sharply. "If the battle was lost, they would be trapped."

"There are hard limits to how much the flicker drive unit can be reduced," the Geek informed them. "So far, we have been unable to overcome those limits."

There was a pause. "Our research, combined with the additional resources captured from naval bases and facilities, has offered several new possibilities," Salgak added. "One suggests that we might be able to wrap a flicker field around gunboats or missiles, tossing them into the enemy system. Another suggests that we might be able to build a working FTL communicator."

Colin leaned forward, fascinated. “You believe you can actually make one work?”

“To a very limited extent,” Salgak said. “The flicker drive works by folding space around the starship, creating a link between its start and end point. We believe that we might be able to drive mass-less energy though a flicker field, projecting the energy forward at FTL speeds. However, the system would be very basic. It would certainly not allow us to extend a datanet over interstellar space.”

He paused. “It would also be quite flimsy,” the Geek added. “The signalling might burn out the system.”

“Like how keeping a flicker drive powered up places wear and tear on the drive systems,” Colin mused. For once, the bureaucrats at Luna Base had a point. The flicker drive was temperamental at the best of times — and, once burned out, it was impossible to replace without a shipyard. Imperial Navy regulations stated that a flicker drive was not to be powered up until the time came to jump, which tended to leave a starship taking incoming fire while it’s engineers frantically activated the drive. “But it would be very useful to have a working FTL communicator.”

He considered the possibilities. If the rebels had real-time information on what was happening even a single sector away, it would be easy to outmanoeuvre the Empire. The Thousand Families would be permanently out of date, while Colin could issue orders and know they would be obeyed instantly. Central command would become a very real possibility.

The Empire would really like such a system, he thought, grimly. *They’d never have to fret over giving so much authority away again*.

“We will work on the system,” the Geek buzzed. “But we caution you that it may be years before the system is workable. We dare not develop a Superiority complex.”

Colin had to smile. *Superiority* was a story cadets had been forced to read while training at Luna Base. The storyteller had recounted the story of how his side in an interstellar war had built several different superweapons, each of which had presented their own colossal problems when they’d actually been deployed. In the meantime, their enemies had kept chugging out standard starships and weapons… which had given them an overpowering advantage — and victory. Colin had wondered, at the time, if the story had been written by someone trying to justify the general freeze on research. It hadn’t been until much later that he’d discovered that the story actually dated all the way back to the pre-space era.

But the writer was right. They could start throwing resources into developing new weapons, but lose the war because the new weapons failed to live up to their promise.

“No, but we will be outgunned once the Empire gets organised,” he said. “What about actual starship production?”

Hannelore leaned forward. “We have taken possession of the Roosevelt Family’s facilities in the sector,” she said. “Most of them were designed to produce heavy cruisers or lighter ships, nothing heavier. They may have intended to launch a civil war of their own.”

Colin snorted. Somehow, he had the feeling that the Roosevelt Family was in deep trouble, back on Earth.

“We should have our first heavy cruiser coming out of the slips in two months,” Hannelore continued. “Our crews are motivated to succeed; I hope to ramp up production in the next three to four months, once we get the bugs out. We’re also completing the first missile defence ship, but that will require extensive testing before we move to mass production.”

“Good,” Colin said. There was nothing particularly *special* about the arsenal ships. He would be surprised if the Empire failed to duplicate the freighter modifications within a month or two of seeing the concept in action. By then, he wanted a countermeasure of his own in place. “And superdreadnaughts?”

“We’re cutting out much of the Class-III shipyard infrastructure,” Hannelore said. “However, it will still be several months before we’re ready to produce our own superdreadnaughts — and at least nine months after that before the ship is ready for launch.”

Colin nodded, although it wasn’t good news. The rebels had captured fifty-six superdreadnaughts in all, including a handful that had mutinied and then made it out to Sector 117 after the Battle of Camelot. But the Empire still had several hundred under its control, an irresistible force if they were combined into a single unit. Colin doubted the Empire would put so much firepower under *anyone’s* control, but it was still a nightmare.

“Work on it,” he ordered, tiredly. He looked around the room, then smiled. One way or another, they would either emerge victorious or lose the war within a year. “We launch in two days. Good luck to us all.”

Chapter Six

"I don't think they trust me very much," Hannelore said, as she stepped through the airlock into *Random Numbers*. "I keep getting suspicious glances."

"Not on my ship," Cordova said. He closed the airlock behind them, then led the way towards Officer Country. "You're more than welcome here."

Hannelore gave him a sharp glance. "You know what I mean."

Cordova said nothing until they were inside his cabin with the hatch firmly closed, then turned to face her. "Trust is not something given freely along the Rim," he said, seriously. "I don't care to recall how long it took me to gain the underground's trust, even though I had a whole heavy cruiser under my command. You're an aristocrat from an aristocratic family and not all of them can see past it. Not yet."

"And yet they trust me to handle procurement and industrial production," Hannelore said. "I have ample opportunities for sabotage."

"There's a shortage of qualified personnel," Cordova reminded her. "But they wouldn't be too trusting of anyone new, no matter where they came from. It takes time to build up trust — and it can be lost in a moment, if the wrong thing is said or done."

He grinned at her. "Can I stop being serious now? I hate it."

Hannelore rolled her eyes. Cordova seemed larger than life. His body was massive, his golden hair and beard made him look like a gallant pirate out of a child's book and he even carried a sword at his belt. The outfit he wore looked thoroughly absurd, the fashion of a bygone age. And he was rarely completely serious, except when he was with her — or Colin, who he seemed to respect. There were times when Hannelore wondered if he was bipolar.

She suspected, judging by his reaction to her comment, that he had aristocratic blood in him too. It wasn't the only clue. He'd spoken to her of the High City more than once, showing a familiarity that could only have been gained through living there for a while. Few non-aristocrats were allowed anywhere near the city, apart from servants — and the servants were conditioned for complete loyalty. No, Cordova had to have been an aristocrat once. And then he'd walked away from it all.

It made him more… moral than her, she decided. *She* had only decided to throw her lot in with the rebels after Cordova had captured her mining platform, although in her heart she had always been a rebel. After all, she could easily have stayed in the High City and sunk

into a life of luxury. Instead, she'd tried to build a fortune for herself — and, when offered the chance, she moved over and joined the rebels. She had little true reason to love the aristocracy. Even her *name* was a reminder that her family hadn't wanted anything apart from someone to bind two families together. And it had failed.

"I managed to get the fleet train organised for you," she said, pushing her memories back into the back of her mind. If the rebels won, she would be well-placed to extract revenge; if they lost, she would have worse problems than bad memories. "You'll have all the supplies you need, I hope."

"I hope so too," Cordova agreed. "None of the ammunition expenditure projections I've seen have ever been anything other than understatements."

"They were trying to save money," Hannelore said. She'd seen similar charts when she'd been a mining engineer. It was astonishing how little concern a manager thousands of light years from her complex had shown for the men and women working in deep space. "But I have crammed forty freighters with missiles, spare parts and repair crews."

The thought made her smile. It was astonishing just how many starships there were in the Beyond — and just how many of them had signed up with the rebellion. But many of their crews had balked at hauling freight, pointing out that there was no glory in it. Hannelore had had to point out, more times than she cared to remember, that rebel starships couldn't fight without missiles, which had to be delivered to the front lines by freighters. And then there were the problems with missile supply… if they hadn't captured the supplies at Camelot, the offensive might have had to be delayed for several months.

"That's a relief," Cordova said, bluntly. "We're not going to be operating in friendly territory."

Hannelore couldn't disagree. Pirates required an infrastructure to operate — and the Imperial Navy had long since purged the Core Worlds of hidden pirate bases, supply dumps and repair yards. There was no shortage of smugglers in the region — the Empire's high taxes had seen to that — but none of them were likely to support even a single pirate ship, let alone a whole squadron. Cordova and his crewmen would be on their own.

Rebel logistics were a nightmare, even without the endless bureaucracy that characterised the Imperial Navy. There was no ready-made network of bases, forcing her to organise freighter convoys to transport supplies from Sector 117 to the front lines. The further Colin and his fleet moved from their bases, the harder it would be to maintain the offensive. Hannelore had actually put out a

standing request that all enemy freighters be captured instead of destroyed. The Shadow Fleet desperately needed them.

The freighter crews had been right; there was no glory in hauling freight. But without them, the offensive would grind to a halt.

"Make sure you come back alive," she ordered. She couldn't go with him, as much as she might want to. She'd accepted her own duties on Camelot. "I'll miss you."

Cordova unbuckled his jacket, then dropped it on the deck. "I'll miss you too," he assured her, as he pulled her into his arms. "Just remember to keep studying logistics."

Hannelore rolled her eyes, then smiled as he started to open her shipsuit. It was odd, but making love with Cordova was more exciting than making love to anyone in the High City. Maybe it was the excitement of being a rebel, matched with the certain knowledge that she would be executed on the spot if she was ever caught… or maybe it was the awareness that Cordova, for all his faults, lived life. It was more than could be said for any spoilt brat from the High City.

Afterwards, she held him tightly. She didn't want to let him go.

* * *

"I had to speak to a few freighter crews," Daria said, as she and Colin sat down to breakfast the following morning. Her bright red hair seemed to glow under the light, drawing attention to her face. "Not all of them were happy serving under Hannelore."

"Bastards," Colin said, shortly. "I thought the Beyond didn't give a damn where you came from, only who you were."

Daria shrugged. "They tend to make an exception for aristocrats," she said. "But she definitely isn't a spy."

Colin tended to agree. Anderson had kept a close eye on Hannelore ever since she joined the rebellion, but even the professional paranoid had had to admit that Hannelore seemed loyal to her new cause. Besides, like Colin himself, she had ample reason to be dissatisfied with her position in the Empire. She could never have risen higher, no matter how well she did.

"I'm a mutineer," Colin pointed out. "Cordova is a deserter. Hester is a rebel. How many half-reformed pirates do we have under our banner?"

"People are stupid," Daria said, dryly. "You should know that by now."

She shook her head. "I also had to speak to a couple of officers who were eagerly looking forward to looting, raping and burning their way across the Empire. We're going to have trouble with them. I can

tell."

Colin nodded. The Empire had sowed hatred wherever it went, even on otherwise harmless and unimportant worlds. In the wake of the rebel conquests, administrators and other imperial personnel had found themselves under attack from their former subordinates and brutally slaughtered. Colin had found himself forced to offer safe havens to the officials, knowing that a bloody slaughter would only harden hearts on the other side. No one would surrender if they thought they were merely going to be killed anyway.

There were plenty of administrators — Admiral Percival, for one — Colin would happily kill himself. He had no problems understanding why the locals would want to slaughter every official they could catch. But it created a political nightmare for the Popular Front.

And it would get worse if his subordinates started committing atrocities in his name.

"Keep a sharp eye on them," he said, finally. "And if they do start committing atrocities, we'll have to deal with them."

He gritted his teeth at the thought. People were rarely logical. If they saw their fellows punished, it was quite likely that they wouldn't see the justice in it. If the atrocity didn't look like an atrocity, or if they believed the victims deserved what they got, they would start wondering about *Colin*. And then he might face a mutiny of his own.

"By now, Public Information will probably have told everyone that we've scorched the entire sector," Daria pointed out. "Do you think it will matter?"

She had a point, Colin knew. The Empire's propaganda machine was the only part of the bureaucracy to be genuinely efficient. By now, he suspected, the Empire's counter-narrative would already be on its way back out towards Camelot and Jackson's Folly. He wondered, absently, just what angle they would take. Would Colin be branded a pirate, a mutineer or someone who had merely been misled? Or would they simply claim that the Shadow Fleet had been captured and its former crewmen executed by rebels? They wouldn't want to suggest that a mutiny could be *successful*.

Colin rather doubted they would succeed. He'd been a naval officer long enough to know that there were plenty of ways to exchange information without Imperial Intelligence getting wind of it, even if it was just whispered conversations in the washrooms or beside one of the heavy drive units. Word of the mutinies would have spread through the entire navy by now, suggesting to capable and ambitious crewmen that they might want to try their luck. Even a failed mutiny would tie up the Empire's resources for quite some time…

… And if they put more Blackshirts on the starships, mutiny was almost guaranteed.

It galled him to be thinking like a calculating bastard, rather than a naval officer. The thought of having crews tormented by drug-addled imbeciles should have been horrific. Instead, he almost welcomed the thought. More mutinies would help the cause immeasurably. But each of them would be triggered by human suffering.

Daria reached over and touched his arm. "Colin?"

Colin started. "Yes?"

"You zoned out for a moment," Daria said. She looked concerned, surprisingly so. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," Colin said, ruefully. Showing weakness was a deadly mistake in the Beyond — and in the navy. "I was just wondering about the cost."

Daria snorted. "Are you having doubts?"

She pushed on before he could answer. "Before we liberated these sectors," she said, "the population lived in a nightmare. None of them dared breath easily. The knock on the door could come at any time, whereupon they could be dragged out of their homes, beaten halfway to death and then taken to penal camps. Their children could be taken away, their property could be seized… they'd just vanish. And, if they were lucky, the worst that would happen was that they spent the rest of their lives in a penal camp.

"Hundreds of worlds were exploited, stripped of natural resources to feed the Thousand Families. Entire planets became debt slaves to the corporations, their population forced to labour endlessly or die. Those who dared to rebel were crushed with overwhelming force, their lives destroyed by the Empire. Do you really think that some additional pain, now, is worse than what they have suffered over the centuries?

"Maybe it was understandable that no one resisted when resistance seemed futile. But now there is hope, now there is a Popular Front… and you, the rebel leader. Now, everyone who hates the Empire has someone to rally around. It will be costly — but will it be worse than leaving the Empire in place?"

She stopped, breathing hard.

"True," Colin agreed. "But I still worry about the cost."

"I think that proves you're human," Daria said. "Do you think the bureaucrats worry about the human cost?"

Colin shook his head. Entire planetary populations had been uprooted, families had been broken up and scattered across several different star systems — and that had been through a desire to rationalise the Empire's work, not genuine malice. The Empire had

done terrible things to planets that had revolted against central control, believing it needed to make examples out of resisters. Colin had seen a planet that had been bombarded back to the Stone Age and another that had been permanently deprived of technology. And that didn't count the worlds that had simply been scorched clean of life.

It would grow worse, he knew, when the Thousand Families turned on themselves. They'd barely been expanding any more, at least until they'd discovered Jackson's Folly. And if the Follies hadn't looked like an easy target for exploitation, they might have been left alone.

"Good," Daria said. "I worry too. But I also know that failing to swallow the medicine, no matter how unpleasant, will ensure that we do not succeed."

Colin nodded, then finished his breakfast. It had astonished him, when he'd first transferred his flag to *General Montgomery*, to discover the sheer level of luxury Stacy Roosevelt had enjoyed. Her quarters had been crammed with artwork, showing a complete lack of taste, while she'd had over forty servants to tend to her needs. It said something about her, Colin had decided, that all of her servants had joined the rebellion the moment they'd been offered the chance. When he'd had a moment, he'd transferred the artwork to help with fundraising and thrown out most of the remaining decorations. The compartment still felt absurdly large for anyone, even an Admiral.

And how many officers, he asked himself, were only promoted because of their connections?

"We will succeed," Colin told her, firmly. He changed the subject quickly. "Where's your shadow?"

"Connecting with a few people who don't want to meet me face to face," Daria said. "Not all of them are my fans. They might want to meet you though."

"They'll have to hurry," Colin said. "We're leaving as soon as possible."

He tapped a switch, activating the star chart. He'd looked at it so often over the past couple of weeks that he felt he'd memorised it. Countless stars were green, indicating that they were of little tactical interest, but a handful were yellow or red, indicating important industrial nodes or naval bases. Morrison, sitting barely a month from Earth, was the darkest red of all.

Colin scowled, wishing he knew just who was in command of the base. Who would the Empire choose? And would it be someone actually competent?

He shook his head. There was no way to know until they were closer. Much closer.

* * *

The spy had plenty of practice at playing her role. As a trained starship engineer, she was simply too important to be discarded for a mere suspicion, something Imperial Intelligence had relied upon when they'd primed her for her role. The Rim had a shortage of trained personnel, ensuring that any newcomer with the right skills was warmly welcomed. It helped that her files — which Imperial Intelligence had carefully inserted into the right networks — contained a sob story about rape, sexual abuse and other matters that would encourage someone to make a run for freedom.

But she could barely contain her astonishment as her shuttle approached the giant superdreadnaught. There were hundreds of thousands — perhaps *millions* — of volunteers joining the rebellion. The Rim had sent thousands of workers, but so too had Jackson's Folly and hundreds of other worlds that had been enslaved by the Empire and then liberated by the rebels. She couldn't believe the sheer scale of the activity taking place in orbit. If she hadn't been conditioned to be completely loyal, she might have considered joining the rebels herself.

A dull mummer of excitement ran through the shuttle as it landed in the shuttlebay. The spy stood and joined the eager throng as they made their way out the hatch and down onto the deck, where they were met by a handful of grim-faced engineering officers. They'd all be tested, of course; there were so many people who wanted to join the rebel fleet that some of them had probably lied about their qualifications. The spy had no worries on *that* score. Even without her files, she had enough experience maintaining starships that she could be an engineering crewwoman without arousing suspicion. And, once her cover was secure, she could start laying her plans.

"Follow me," one of the crewmen said. "And *don't* wander off."

The spy concealed her amusement as he led them through a long corridor and down into the engineering compartment. Her companions seemed awed by the sheer size of the superdreadnaught. But in space, there was no real reason why someone couldn't build a starship the size of a small moon, if they were prepared to waste the resources. It was planet-side industry that suffered from odd limitations.

As she had anticipated, the test was simple, absurdly simple. A quarter of her comrades still failed, however, and were marched back to the shuttlebay. The remainder were escorted to cabins and told to settle in. There was some grumbling — the general expectation had been that they would get to grips with the Empire at once — but the spy was not surprised. Hurry up and wait was an old military saying.

She smiled, inwardly, as she lay on her bunk. *This* time, she told herself, it would be different. The rebels would not get lucky again.

Chapter Seven

It was four days before the underground made contact, four days of ration bars, tedious conversation and moments of fear when security forces seemed to be pounding through the corridors. Adeeba liked Frandsen, but after several months cooped up together in a tiny starship they had little left to talk about, even if they hadn't known they were under surveillance. She spent her time reading the datapad, wishing that they'd been able to bring something less bland than government-approved files. But almost anything else would have raised eyebrows.

When the door finally opened, it was almost a relief. Three young men stepped inside, all with the look of guarded suspicion worn by almost everyone born on Earth. Adeeba shivered, remembering her own childhood, as the men motioned for them to pick up their bags and follow them out of the door. Outside, the corridors seemed packed with men and women, all wearing the same drab overalls. They also wore metallic bracelets that glittered ominously in the light.

"Take these," their escort muttered. Adeeba glanced down at the bracelet, then put it on her wrist. It clicked into place, seemingly as immovable as a handcuff. "Then remove them as you pass through the security gate."

There were thousands of workers making their escape, Adeeba saw, as they reached the checkpoint. The guards looked bored, uninterested, as the bracelets were scanned, then removed and dropped in the bucket. They would be recycled the following morning, Adeeba recalled, remembering how the system worked. No one could enter or leave the complex without being noted and logged by the system. She couldn't help wondering how the underground intended to ensure that they were listed as having logged in instead of just seeming to appear from nowhere inside the complex.

But no alarms sounded as the bracelet was scanned, then unlocked. She let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding, dropped the bracelet in the bucket and then followed their escort out into the city. Earth smelled worse out here, she decided, the stench bringing back old memories. The thousands of civilian workers seemed unaware of the smell as they headed back to their homes, leaving their work behind for the day. Adeeba and Frandsen were simply lost in the crowd, two out of millions of civilians. Their escorts guided them down a long passageway and into an underpass that seemed to lead into darkness. The dank smell of human urine reached her nostrils as they stopped outside an access hatch, then stepped into a narrow passageway that seemed to be lined with electronic boxes.

She jumped the first time the walls shook, then realised where they were. They were walking alongside the underground transport tube network.

They stopped outside another hatch, which opened after their escort tapped out a pattern, revealing a small dimly-lit office. Inside, two men and a woman were seated at a table, pretending to read pornographic magazines. Adeeba didn't miss how their eyes weren't actually following the images, but keeping an eye on the newcomers. Behind them, the hatch slammed closed. If this was a trap, she knew, they were thoroughly caught.

"You may call me Gaunt," the woman said, putting her magazine down. It looked surprisingly tame, compared to some of the material Adeeba had seen in the Imperial Navy. "For the moment, you will deal with me — and only with me. If you have a problem with this, too bad. We don't dare risk being betrayed."

"We understand," Adeeba assured her. The Empire had no shortage of ways to get information out of unwilling donors. No matter how determined someone was to refrain from talking, they could be made to talk. "We have taken similar precautions ourselves."

"I do hope so," Gaunt said. She stepped forward, into the light. "As you can see, we know the consequences of being betrayed."

Adeeba studied her for a long moment. Gaunt was tall, bald and had a very nasty scar on her face. One of her eyes was covered with an eye patch, suggesting that it had been removed at some point; the other flickered around madly, watching for threats. This was not a woman to underestimate, Adeeba realised. If she had suffered so much and kept going, she would be willing to do whatever it took to get revenge. And she probably considered she had little to lose, if the shit hit the fan.

"So," Gaunt said, coming to a halt right in front of Adeeba. "Tell me why we should listen to you?"

Adeeba sighed and started to tell the entire story, once again.

"We have sources in the High City," Gaunt said, when she had finished. "We can confirm most of what you've told us."

Adeeba wasn't too surprised. Admiral Percival had worked hard to keep news from leaking outside Sector 117 — he'd known he would get the blame for the whole incident, if he failed to stop the rebels before the news got out — but the fall of Camelot had definitely broken the media blockade. Earth might well have received bits and pieces before the first complete report actually arrived. But had they taken the isolated fragments seriously?

"We can also confirm that the Imperial Navy has dispatched a task force to Morrison," Gaunt added, coldly. "If you wished to delay its departure, you have failed."

“That wasn’t all we had in mind,” Adeeba said. She explained, briefly, what she’d told the Big Man. “We would like to coordinate your efforts with ours. This is the one chance we will have to bring down the Empire. If you can make it easier to take down Earth itself…”

“My superiors might question the wisdom of involving ourselves,” Gaunt said. “We would certainly require more proof of your good faith — and your willingness to keep promises.”

Adeeba kept her face expressionless, but she knew she’d found at least one ally. There was an odd… carelessness about Gaunt that suggested she would be happy with the thought of action, even if it carried immense risks. She hadn’t had them strip-searched and scanned thoroughly as soon as they entered the meeting place, after all. Either that, Adeeba decided, or she was sure she could escape the security forces, if they were shadowing her visitors.

“Rebel starships will start operating within this sector soon,” Adeeba said, hoping that Colin hadn’t had reason to change the plans. They’d both known that operational requirements might force him to hold back. “For the moment, all we really ask from you is intelligence — and that you prepare an uprising in conjunction with our invasion of the system.”

“If it happens,” Gaunt observed. “Your forces are an awful long way away.”

“I’m here,” Adeeba said. “The others are on their way.”

Frandsen leaned forward. “I understand a reluctance to show yourselves,” he said. “But this is likely to be the best chance you have to actually *win*. Your superiors should also understand that if they don’t take part, they will have little say in how the post-Empire universe develops. I suggest you make that clear to them.”

Gaunt studied him for a long cold moment, then nodded. “I assume you have a pipeline set up to get intelligence out of the system?”

“Yes,” Adeeba said, shortly. If all went to plan, the pipeline should lead to the raiding fleet when it finally arrived. But the plan itself was imprecise. There were just too many factors that might delay matters, too many things that might go wrong. “If worst comes to worst, we can send a ship all the way to Jackson’s Folly.”

“Then we will discuss matters and get back to you,” Gaunt said. “You will be escorted to one of the chambers we use to hide people from the Blackshirts. I suggest that you stay there until we come for you. The lower levels are not as closely observed as the higher levels, but you might still be noticed. If we choose to work with you, we will teach you how to get around Earth undetected.”

“Understood,” Adeeba said, shortly. There was no point in

arguing. She might have been born on Earth, but she knew little about getting around without being observed. And Earth was the most heavily-wired planet in the galaxy. “Can we get some reading material this time?”

Gaunt laughed, but there was no humour in the sound. “Maybe you would like the statements issued by Public Information on their *special* paper,” she said. “It’s ideal for wiping your ass.”

* * *

“That’s the latest report from Luna Base,” Sharon said. “And Lady Gwendolyn has requested to speak with you at your earliest convenience.”

Tiberius sighed. There was really far too many reports for him to read, as Family Head, but he didn’t dare pass too many of them down to his subordinates. His uncles and cousins would be delighted to take the responsibility from his hands, knowing that it would give them control over part of the family’s interests — and eventually enough leverage to render him a figurehead. He didn’t dare allow that to happen, not when the family’s very survival was at risk.

“Tell her I’ll see her in an hour,” Tiberius said, wearily. He didn’t know how his father and grandfather had managed to keep an iron grip on the family’s affairs. But then, they’d been old enough to know where all the bodies were buried, sometimes literally. “Do you have a report from the security office?”

“Nothing since the last report,” Sharon said. “Do you want me to request a progress report?”

Tiberius shook his head. It would make him feel like he was doing something, but it wouldn’t really be helpful. The security officers would fall over themselves to give him a progress report, instead of doing something actually *useful*. It had taken him several months to realise that micromanaging his handful of trusted subordinates was pointless at best, dangerous at worst. Some of his fellows had never understood it.

“No, thank you,” he said. “But if you could tell Marie to attend me after Gwen, I would be very grateful.”

Sharon bobbled a curtsey to him and withdrew, leaving him to read through the report from Luna Base. As Wachter had warned, in his last message before the fleet had flickered out, corruption had actually worn down Home Fleet’s ability to fight. Indeed, the report suggested, if the rebels had set out for Earth just after the Battle of Camelot, they might well have won. Home Fleet was in no condition for a fight. Wachter had added a strong suggestion that they appoint

another CO, one who had the ability to kick ass and take names, then sort out the mess. He hadn't realised that the political struggle over appointing a commander at Morrison would pall compared to the struggle over Home Fleet's CO.

The Empress used Home Fleet against us, despite all of our precautions, Tiberius thought. He was unique among the Family Heads, simply because he hadn't been born when the Empress had seized power for herself, only to lose it scant months later. No one knew what had happened to her, merely that she'd vanished when the patronage networks had united against a common foe. *We have good reason to fear handing someone else the same power*.

But Wachter was right too. The Empire had been safe. There was no alien power capable of threatening the Empire, while the various underground movements couldn't do more than harass the Empire's forces. The occasional mutiny or rogue starship couldn't do any real damage either, even united with the exiles along the Rim. Everyone had *known* there was no reason for Home Fleet to be in top condition.

And now there was a genuine threat, political games would make it harder to assemble a defence force.

He scowled. The Empire was sluggish, slow to realise that there was a threat and slow to react, taking comfort in its overwhelming firepower to make up for any delay in its response. But now there was a threat with enough firepower not to be intimidated by superdreadnaughts — and the determination to take advantage of delays in the Empire's response.

We can supervise Home Fleet, he thought, grimly. *We couldn't do that for Morrison.*

He was so wrapped in his thoughts that he almost didn't hear Sharon calling him until she repeated herself, telling him that Gwendolyn was waiting to see him. Tiberius sighed, then invited Gwendolyn to enter the room. This time, she was wearing a long white gown that set her blonde hair off nicely, hinting at her attributes rather than revealing them. Tiberius wondered, absently, who she was planning to seduce… or if she was simply trying to look the part of an Ambassador. After all, she would have to impress the rebels…

"I reviewed the files," Gwendolyn said, taking a seat without being invited. "The rebels will want quite a bit from us, won't they?"

Tiberius scowled. Ideally, he would like to see everything return to the status quo, but he knew better than to expect it. Even if they beat *this* rebellion, the example the rebels had set would inspire others. There were still reports of mutinies coming in from the other side of the Empire.

"I imagine they will," he said. "But it depends on the military

situation."

The Thousand Families had started life as corporate power blocs, back in the days of the First Emperor and the Great Interstellar War. They'd built the massive industrial machine that had propelled humanity to victory and they had had no intention of forgoing the rewards of their efforts. The First Emperor had merely been the one to step forward and try to seize supreme power for himself. His former comrades had turned on him, fearing the consequences of concentrating so much power in one man's hands. But, a thousand years later, power was concentrated in a handful of hands. It wasn't much of an improvement, Tiberius realised.

"If we are in a position where we can offer the rebels our services, we will give up political power in exchange for retaining our economic power," he said. It would be a tricky balancing act. They would have to switch sides when they still had something to offer the rebels, but after the other families had lost the ability to lash out and punish the deserters. "If not, we will seek to gain control of their tech advances in exchange for light treatment."

Gwendolyn gave him a sugary-sweet smile. "And what would the other families make of your planning?"

Tiberius smiled back. "You intend to betray your family?"

His smile grew wider at her expression. She *could* reveal some of his contingency plans to the other Family Heads, but no one would ever trust her again. The family came first, always. It was hammered into their heads as soon as they grew old enough to learn. And if Gwendolyn betrayed the family openly, she would be lucky to survive long enough to regret it.

"I merely point out the possibility of a leak," Gwendolyn said, stiffly.

"I merely point out that you are the only person who knows the plan," Tiberius said, mockingly. There was no point in trying to be polite with someone who would merely see it as a sign of weakness. "You will not share it with anyone, even Pompey. You will keep it in mind until the time comes to use it."

He leaned backwards, studying her. "When are you leaving?"

"Tonight," Gwendolyn said. "We're not going to be taking a known ship — or a crew. Pompey has already secured a yacht that can be handled by one person. He thinks we shouldn't have any problems reaching Camelot — or Jackson's Folly."

Tiberius concealed his amusement. Two people, alone on a ship for six months… it sounded like a bad soap opera. By the time they reached their destination, Gwendolyn and Pompey would either be firm friends or sworn enemies. He briefly considered the relationship potential, then dismissed the thought. They might not have been

closely related enough for it to count as incest, and thus forbidden, but they weren't exactly compatible.

"I shall place you in his capable hands," he said. "Of course, if you do get caught by the other families, I shall deny all knowledge of you."

Gwendolyn snorted, rudely.

"Thank you," she said, standing up. "We will do our best."

Tiberius didn't doubt it. Success in such a delicate mission would ensure that Gwendolyn's status within the family rose rapidly. Failure would go unacknowledged; hell, the entire mission would be wiped from the files so completely that human memory would be all that remained. Gwendolyn might just succeed in escaping blame completely.

He stood and held out a hand. After a moment, she shook it firmly, then turned and walked out the door. Tiberius watched her go, then smiled as Marie stepped inside, carrying a towel under one arm. Even in the High City, where beauty was common, she was extraordinary. Long dark hair framed a muscular body and breasts that were just the right size. But she was the most talented massage therapist in the High City, as far as Tiberius could tell. He'd bought out her contract the day after discovering just how much tension he felt after his first full meeting of the Family Council.

"Please, lie down," Marie said, with a bow. The loose dress she wore fell open slightly, revealing her breasts. "I will make you feel better."

Tiberius snorted. It wasn't as if she could take his problems away. But he'd done all he could and now he would have to wait. And pray. Perhaps she could help him forget, just for a while.

He stood up, removed his tunic, then lay down on the sofa. There was a whispering sound as Marie removed her dress, then bent down and started to work on his back. Sighing, Tiberius gave himself up to her ministrations. It would keep him distracted long enough to make him relax.

Chapter Eight

Commodore Jeremy Damiani sat on *Shadow's* command bridge and watched as her crew scurried to battlestations. The battlecruiser had seen more than her fair share of action since the original mutiny — Colin himself had commanded her, before shifting his flag to the superdreadnaught — but half of her crew was new. Jeremy had been running endless drills ever since the squadron had departed Camelot, yet the only true test would come when they encountered the enemy for the first time.

He leaned back in his chair, trying to project an air of unconcern. The shortage of crewmen was particularly acute when it came to senior officers, most of whom had either thrown their lot in with the rebels or insisted on being transferred to a holding colony. Jeremy was not only the commander of the entire squadron, he was the battlecruiser's commander too. His XO had been a Lieutenant before the mutiny and didn't have the experience to handle the post, let alone overall command. But there was no alternative.

"All systems report ready, Captain," the XO said. He looked absurdly young — and he *was* absurdly young — but his voice was steady. "*Shadow* is fully at your command."

Jeremy nodded, never taking his eyes off the datanet. The entire squadron had gone to battlestations, linking their ships into a single entity. They were ready for anything, he hoped, although the preliminary survey of the system ahead of them had concluded that there was nothing more dangerous than a handful of destroyers and automated weapons platforms in orbit. Jeremy rather hoped that was true. An easy victory would do wonders for morale, particularly after the last bruising exercise. It had been carefully designed to give the enemy every possible advantage.

"Power up the flicker drive," he ordered, pushing his thoughts aside. "Jump on my mark."

A dull whine echoed through the battlecruiser as the flicker drive powered up. Jeremy tensed, remembering all the combat jumps they'd carried out since the mutiny had begun. He might not have been there for the start, but he'd joined as soon as he'd been offered an opportunity. After spending months serving Stacy Roosevelt, even the prospect of being shot for mutiny no longer seemed terrifying.

"Jump," he ordered.

His stomach clenched as space twisted around the giant battlecruiser, jumping them two light years into the enemy-controlled system. He swallowed hard, refusing to show any signs of weakness on his command bridge, then looked up as the display rapidly lit up with

new icons, each one a potential threat. Four Imperial Navy destroyers were hanging in orbit around Happy Daze, two more seemed to be leaving orbit in company with a pair of freighters. Behind them, the automated weapons platforms wouldn't be a problem until the battlecruisers entered orbit. In any case, they were unlikely to impede Colin's advance towards Earth.

"Transmit a demand for surrender," he ordered, as the squadron powered towards the planet, weapons and sensors probing the darkness for threats. "And inform them that we will spare the lives of anyone who joins us."

He watched as the IFFs popped up on the display. The destroyers weren't Imperial Navy, he noted without surprise, but Household Troops belonging to a particular family. Rumour had it that Household Troops received the very best of everything, from salaries to women and other perks; they certainly rarely seemed disloyal to their masters. Chances were they'd fire a few shots for the honour of the flag, then flicker out. Loyal or not, six destroyers couldn't stand up to nine battlecruisers.

"They just sent us a copy of their brochure," the communications officer said. She sounded as though she were trying hard not to laugh. "We can swim in their cool waters, climb their high mountains…"

Jeremy shook his head, wondering just what the enemy CO was thinking. Had they even *heard* about the revolution? Happy Daze was quite isolated, he knew; the system rarely had any traffic that wasn't connected to its status as a holiday resort for the wealthy and powerful among the aristocrats and their servants. But surely the Imperial Navy Sector CO would at least have *tried* to warn them. His patron wouldn't have thanked him for leaving so many people to be caught by the rebels.

"Repeat our demand for surrender," he ordered. It was unlikely in the extreme that the system *didn't* know about the rebellion, which suggested that the system CO was trying to irritate him. "And then prepare to engage the enemy."

Four icons vanished from the display. "Sir," the tactical officer said, "the freighters and their escorts just jumped out. I couldn't get a bearing on their course from this distance."

Jeremy scowled. The tactical officer, thankfully, had *some* formal training, but his former CO had been a right bastard, snapping and snarling at his men for every little setback. No tactical officer could *hope* to draw a bearing from such a distance, let alone take his ship in hot pursuit, yet the officer still worried about punishment. Not for the first time, he wondered why it had taken so long for a general mutiny to get underway.

"Don't worry about it," he said. If there was one thing he had

learned from working with Stacy Roosevelt, it was that shooting the messenger only ensured that one got less mail. The crew might not pass on something vitally important if they thought he would take it out on them. “Lock weapons on the other destroyers.”

He looked back at the display, wondering if the enemy CO was mad — or if he had laid a trap. The enemy destroyers had formed up into a hammerhead formation, combining their weapons and sensors into a single unit… which would be admirable if a single battlecruiser didn’t mount more missile tubes and energy weapons than an entire squadron of destroyers. A single barrage from his ships would be enough to wipe out the entire enemy squadron. He couldn’t decide if the enemy CO was trying to bluff him… or was merely planning to fight to the death, no matter how pointless it seemed. Maybe he expected nothing, but punishment for abandoning the planet.

And yet he can’t hope to save it, Jeremy thought, as the two squadrons converged. *Any fool could see that, just by weighing his firepower against mine.*

“Entering weapons range in two minutes,” the tactical officer said. There was a hint of excitement in his voice, overshadowing his earlier worries. Tactical officers were trained to be aggressive and, now that the Shadow Fleet had removed the non-professional requirements for promotion, it could come rapidly to a proven operator. “Missiles locked on target, ready to fire. Energy weapons locked on target, ready to fire.”

“Stand by,” Jeremy ordered. What *was* the enemy commander thinking? Had he laid a minefield? No, that would have required precognition. Even a spy on *Shadow* wouldn’t have known their exact angle of approach. Jeremy himself hadn’t known. “Fire the first barrage as soon as we enter weapons range, then hold fire.”

An alarm sounded as the enemy ships opened fire, the display suddenly lighting up with dozens of red icons. They’d crammed additional external racks onto their hulls, Jeremy saw, improving their throw weight at the cost of some manoeuvrability. They *did* know about the rebellion then, he told himself, as *Shadow* shivered and unleashed her own barrage. Even without expending *her* external racks, it was still more firepower than all four enemy destroyers could hope to unleash.

The enemy destroyers vanished from the display. Jeremy heard the tactical officer’s gasp of dismay; the enemy had simply flickered out rather than allow the missiles to strike home. It *was* about their only viable tactic, Jeremy knew. He ordered the tactical officer to deactivate their missiles — thankfully, the Imperial Navy had long since perfected the technique of recovering unexpended missiles — and then watched as the enemy missiles entered his point defence

envelope. One by one, they were picked off and vaporised before they could strike the starship's shields, let alone its hull.

Jeremy sat back, studying the tactical analysis. There were no noted improvements in the enemy missiles, no ECM or modified seeker heads that might give them a chance to score hits. He wasn't too surprised — the Imperial Navy wasn't known for innovation — but Anderson had warned him to keep an eye open for surprises. If the Roosevelt Family had been quietly preparing for the collapse of the Empire, why not other families? And why couldn't they seek secret alliances with rogue scientists?

"Picking up all four enemy destroyers, right at the edge of sensor range," the sensor officer said. "They're keeping an eye on us, sir."

"Unsurprising," Jeremy commented. The enemy CO had clearly decided to witness whatever happened in the system, even if he couldn't do anything to stop it. Not an idiot, then; it was almost a shame he had refused the invitation to join the rebellion. Who knew what piece of tactical information would serve as a clue to rebel capabilities? "Keep an eye on them in return."

He looked over towards the helm. "Take us in towards the planet," he ordered. "And fire on the automated platforms as soon as they come into range, then dispatch the recovery crews."

Happy Daze belonged to one of the smaller families, according to the files. Unlike most colony worlds, it had been left almost completely uninhabited after the terraforming process had been completed. The only permanent population, at least as far as anyone knew, was a small army of servants, gamekeepers and pleasure slaves, who would remain on the planet until they had completed their service. Visitors to the planet could enjoy pampering on a colossal scale, from swimming in warm moonlit seas to hunting dangerous animals in the bush. The sheer scale of the resort world stunned Jeremy every time he considered it; they'd turned an entire *planet* into a holiday camp. They could have established a similar installation on an inhabited world and it would have been much cheaper. And they still would have had guaranteed security.

But they hadn't installed massive defences, he noted, as the automated platforms came into range. They were enough to deter a pirate attack — and there wasn't anything else in the system worth defending — but they couldn't hope to stand off a single battlecruiser, let alone nine of them. And, unlike the destroyers, they had no way to flicker out and escape certain destruction. Jeremy watched dispassionately as the platforms fought briefly, then were picked off one by one. There wasn't anything else in orbit, not even a transit station.

They probably just kept the shuttles on the ground, he thought, as the

battlecruisers settled into orbit. *It isn't as though they need a large infrastructure.*

"Hail them," he ordered. "Transmit the pre-recorded message."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said.

Jeremy smiled to himself. If the people on the ground had any sense, they would have already evacuated the holiday resort. It was quite likely that anyone important had already been evacuated — they'd had at least five months warning, perhaps more — but he doubted they would have evacuated the servants. But in any case, the planet was completely naked. A handful of KEW strikes would obliterate the facilities, leaving the survivors completely isolated. In order to meet Colin's demand that the rebels try to avoid atrocities, the message gave the inhabitants thirty minutes to evacuate.

There was little on the planet that was actually worth destroying — and nothing that was of any military value. Jeremy had questioned the value of hitting the planet at all, only to have Colin point out that the family that owned the planet would be furious with the Imperial Navy for failing to provide additional protection. Besides, it was possible that losing the planet's facilities would cause more economic damage. The analysts weren't sure if the family actually owned everything or if they were still paying off the loans. Untangling the financial network underpinning the Empire, they'd confessed, could take years. Jeremy rather suspected that the best option would be to destroy everything and start again from scratch.

But then countless millions will starve, he thought. There were hundreds of worlds dependent on food shipments because they'd never been allowed to set up farms for themselves. The whole system was rotten to the core. *We have to be more careful.*

"Picking up a message," the communications officer said. "They're offering to pay a colossal ransom if we leave the system without destroying anything — anything else."

Jeremy shook his head. There was no point in trying to take money, not when the value of the Imperial Credit was sinking rapidly. Raw materials or industrial production might be worthwhile, but there was nothing in the system that was worth the effort of collecting it. It was possible that the destroyers might be surrendered to him, yet he rather doubted it. The family would be heavily penalised for aiding and abetting the rebels.

Idiots, he thought. *It isn't as if countless destroyer-sized starships didn't go rogue.*

"Tell them that they now have" — he glanced at the display — "fifteen minutes to evacuate the facilities."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said.

Jeremy waited, studying the enemy destroyers in the display.

Would their CO throw caution to the winds and do something stupidly heroic, or would he just watch and plot revenge? Four destroyers couldn't fight an entire squadron of battlecruisers, but they could cause real trouble behind the lines. The rebel supply lines weren't as solid as they might wish in any case. If the CO was cunning enough to plan his attacks carefully, he might cripple the offensive as it progressed towards Morrison.

Or would he simply head towards Morrison himself?

The timer reached zero. "Launch KEWs," he ordered, shortly. The tactical staff had plenty of time to refine their targeting systems. "Take out the facilities."

He'd half-expected force field defences, but nothing materialised as the KEWs fell down and struck their targets. There was no need for warheads; one by one, the facilities that had taken so much time and effort to build were wiped out of existence. Jeremy said a silent prayer for the employees, servants and slaves — he hoped they had evacuated, even though he knew their superiors might have forced them to stay in the complex in the hopes of using them as human shields — and then looked over at the helm. There was no longer any point in remaining within the system.

"Take us to safe distance, then prepare to flicker out," he ordered.

The squadron rose up, heading away from the planet. Jeremy watched the enemy destroyers as they altered course themselves, moving to shadow the battlecruisers. It made no sense to him, then he realised that the enemy CO was hoping to get a bearing from their jump out of the system. It wouldn't do Imperial Intelligence any good — he wasn't planning to jump all the way to a secret rebel base — but it did suggest that the enemy CO was crafty.

You're on the wrong side, mate, he thought.

But he'd been on the wrong side too, until he'd been offered a chance to join the rebellion. Somehow, despite his resentment, he had never really considered mutiny; the Empire's illusion of invincibility had been too strong. But now… now there were no limits. And word of the Empire's defeats was spreading rapidly. They'd never be able to recover completely, even if they beat Colin and the Shadow Fleet.

He briefly considered trying to mousetrap the destroyers, before dismissing the thought. The enemy CO was cagey, cagey enough to make it unlikely that he could be trapped. He sensed a calculating mind in his opponent, cold and dispassionate enough not to be tricked into rash moves. There was no point in wasting time trying to kill a single enemy officer.

"Captain," the helmsman said, "we are at minimum safe distance from the planet."

"Set a random destination, then flicker out," Jeremy ordered.

Maybe — just maybe — the enemy crew was good enough to get a bearing on their departure. It wouldn't do them any good if the coordinates led to empty space, three light years from the nearest star. "And then stand down from battlestations and jump us to the first scheduled waypoint."

He relaxed as his stomach twisted again, then relaxed. The operation had gone entirely according to plan, a welcome surprise. They'd jumped in, blasted their targets and jumped out again without loss. By all standards, it had been a textbook operation. Colin would be pleased, once he heard the news. Jeremy's fleet would reform in three weeks, after picking off a whole series of targets. If every operation was successful, the Empire would face colossal problems in rebuilding…

But he knew that few of their targets had any tactical significance at all. They might wound the Empire's economy, they might prick it's pride, but they wouldn't impede the war effort or cripple the Empire's military strength. Given time, the Empire could put together a fleet that utterly outgunned the Shadow Fleet… and now they were on the alert. Just because Stacy Roosevelt had been incompetent didn't mean that they were *all* incompetent. The enemy CO at Happy Daze had been cunning and *very* capable. What could he do with a squadron of superdreadnaughts?

I don't want to know, Jeremy decided. It was possible that the CO would be shot for his failure. He disliked the thought intensely, but if it removed a competent player from the enemy side maybe it was worth it. *But we might find out the hard way*.

He stood up. "Send the tactical reports to my office," he ordered, as he walked towards the hatch. He would have to assess every ship's performance, then suggest areas they should focus on in exercises. There was nothing quite like action to expose weak points. "XO, you have the bridge."

Chapter Nine

Morrison had a long and illustrious history, Penny knew. It had been a naval base before there had actually been an Imperial Navy, then a staging post during the Great Interstellar War. Later, it had served as a base for the Empire's absorption of all known human colony worlds, only to become less important as the borders were pushed further and further away. Even so, it was still an immense facility. Morrison itself was surrounded by asteroid settlements, shipyards and industrial nodes, while the gas giant had a dozen cloudscoops and other facilities in orbit. She couldn't help feeling impressed at the sheer level of activity in the system.

Admiral Wachter seemed less impressed as the fleet headed towards the massive orbital fortress that served as System Command. And, as she watched, Penny understood why. The squadron should have been challenged at once, the moment they flickered into the system. No challenge had been forthcoming, nor had the defences gone to full alert. The Admiral snorted in disapproval, then keyed into the system and started to read his way through the full reports. He looked up five minutes later.

"Dispatch inspection teams to the fortresses, the reserves and a random number of starships," he ordered. "Concentrate on the heavier ships, but pick them at random."

"Yes, sir," Penny said, gratified that her voice remained steady. A month in transit had given her time to recover, although she still had panic attacks from time to time. The Admiral expected her to think, but he didn't expect her to stress herself out too much. "I'll send the teams at once."

"Then call a full gathering of senior officers — captains and higher — to take place on my ship, five hours from now," Wachter added. "Inform them that attendance is mandatory. Anyone who doesn't attend can save time by handing in their resignation."

Penny surprised herself by giggling. "They're not going to believe it," she pointed out. It was hard to fire a senior officer, particularly one with high-ranking patrons. "They might be defiant…"

"Good," Wachter said. He swung his console over so she could see what he saw. "Just looking from the outside is enough to tell me that someone has been quite hellishly incompetent. Quite a few people, in fact. If the rebels attacked the system, now, I'd expect the defenders to lose."

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at the display. "Heads are going to roll," he added. "And I mean that literally."

Penny nodded, then started to organise the gathering. As she had

expected, it wasn't easy to convince everyone to attend. Most of Morrison's higher ranks had been there long enough to think themselves immovable, while their juniors were too intimidated or apathetic to care what their seniors did. She wasn't too surprised. Morrison might once have been a great naval base, but it had been thousands of light years behind the border for too long. By the time the meeting was meant to take place, she was having wistful thoughts about a rebel attack.

"Wear your dress uniform," Wachter ordered, as they prepared for the gathering. "And take your service pistol with you."

Penny had been astonished to discover just how many senior officers there were attached to Morrison. There were over five hundred captains, commodores and admirals in the system, half of whom seemed to be redundant. Only two hundred captains even commanded a starship. As several of those ships were listed as being part of the reserve, it was quite likely that they were only in nominal command. It hadn't stopped them from collecting the salaries attached to the positions.

The compartment was normally used for fleet-level briefings, where over a hundred officers might gather to hear their commander speak. It was the largest compartment on the superdreadnaught, yet cramming so many officer inside was impossible. Penny had finally been forced to separate the lower-ranking officers from their commanders, assigning them to smaller compartments. The whole briefing was going to be broadcast to the entire system anyway — Wachter had insisted — but the attendees hadn't been told about it. They might have used it as an excuse not to attend in person.

Wachter strode into the compartment and stepped onto the podium, glaring down at the assembled officers. Penny followed him into the compartment, then stood at the edge of the room, beside an armed and armoured Marine. There was an entire company of Marines on alert, just in case the officers decided to get rowdy. Wachter had insisted, despite Penny's doubts that the officers would offer violence. Unlike Percival, he hadn't snapped at her for offering her opinion.

"For those of you who don't know me," Wachter said, "I am Admiral Joshua Wachter, your new commanding officer. I assume that some of you, at least, have had the sense to access my file once you heard I was taking command. Those of you will know that I have no patience for idiots, I don't suffer fools gladly and I am absolute death on corruption. This base is supposed to be the linchpin of Earth's defences, the final barrier between an outside threat and the Core Worlds. And this base is in terrible condition."

He tapped off points on his fingers, one by one. "Starships in the reserve have been cannibalised, allowed to decay or simply sold off,

existing only on paper. Orbital defences have been allowed to weaken to nothingness. Starship maintenance cycles have been abandoned. Spare parts have been sold off to civilian interests while military crews have been forced to scrounge for enough replacements to keep their starships at a barely functional level. High-ranking officers are paid for doing nothing, as far as I can see, while junior officers and crewmen have been deprived of their pay for weeks or months. And quite a few experienced crewmen have been booted out of the navy, even though we desperately need their skills."

There was a long pause. "Would any of you care to dispute that assessment?"

Penny rather doubted that anyone would. She was right.

"I checked the accounts too," Wachter added. "Credits have been assigned to procuring pleasure slaves and prostitutes, while starships and orbital fortresses have been deprived of their discretionary funds. Vast sums of money seem to have vanished without trace. Tell me something, if you would be so kind. Just why did you think you could get away with it for so long?"

His voice dripped sarcasm. "Oh, I can guess," he mocked. "You believed that your patrons would protect you. Perhaps you were giving them a cut of the proceeds. Perhaps you thought that you were satisfying their desires. And perhaps you thought Morrison would never have to go back on a war footing. Well, you were wrong!

"Rebels have taken Sector 117. By now, they will have taken several more sectors — and they will be advancing towards us. They will have no choice. And, if the situation in this system continues, they will overrun the planet and its defences with ease, before advancing onwards to Earth. It will not happen. I will not *let* it happen."

His voice hardened. "A third of you have already been marked down as hopelessly, stupidly corrupt. I say stupidly because you didn't even show the intelligence of a parasite, one smart enough to know it would die when its host died. This isn't favour-trading, this isn't simply skimming some money off the top of a contract, this is outright treason! And you will be removed from your positions, stripped of your ranks and dumped on a penal colony. Your patrons will not lift a single finger to save you."

Penny watched as the Marines flowed through the room, hunting for the people on the list and removing them. There was little resistance, not when the Marines wore light combat armour and carried stunners. The officers who had been spared were staring at Wachter with a strange mixture of emotions on their faces; fear, awe, even a certain amount of respect. But Penny knew that it wasn't over yet.

Wachter waited until the last officer was removed, then he smiled coldly at the remaining officers. “Doesn’t the room seem smaller without them in it?”

His smile grew wider, but still lacked warmth. “If I had the time, I would sack all of you,” he added. “You did nothing to stop your peers from stealing money, abusing personnel and generally ensuring that Morrison wasted away. A few more decades of such treatment and the rebels wouldn’t have to bother attacking the system. As it is, I will expect one hundred percent commitment from each of you to refurbishing the starships and defences before the rebels attack. If I catch you skimming, slacking or being generally obnoxious, I will put you out the airlock personally. Do you understand me?”

Penny concealed her amusement with an effort. The officers looked thoroughly cowed, although she doubted that would last long. They were probably already composing the notes they intended to send to their patrons, protesting that Wachter was severely overstepping his authority. Penny suspected they would be astonished when they discovered that, if anything, Wachter had the power to purge them all and spit on their remains. No doubt the patronage networks would respond, eventually, but by then the rebels would either have been defeated… or it wouldn’t matter in any case.

“Now,” Wachter said. “We have seven squadrons of superdreadnaughts here. Only three of them, according to my teams, can be considered combat-worthy. The others will need some heavy refurbishment before they can even be considered more than scrap metal, let alone moving targets. The squadron commanding officers were among those removed. Let’s see if their replacements can do a better job.”

* * *

Penny suspected that no one on Morrison had ever expected an inspection by a neutral inspector, let alone someone like Admiral Wachter. The Admiral seemed a human dynamo of energy, moving from ship to ship and inspecting them personally, promoting, demoting or even sacking officers on the spot. After two bullying rings were uncovered, large numbers of ordinary crewmen were switched around or added to the holding pens, where they were forced to wait with their former superiors. The Admiral, perhaps wisely, had banned all out-system communications for at least a week.

But it was an immensely difficult task. Each hour brought new problems for the Admiral to solve, ranging from personnel discipline to a colossal shortage of spare parts. The Admiral exploded with rage

when he discovered that the industrial facilities had been working flat-out to produce spares, but none of the production had ever been sent to the fleet. Instead, they had been sold to civilians — or pirates. There were enough starships that existed only on paper for Penny to suspect that some of them had simply been sold to pirates. Their so-called commanding officers had simply pocketed the funds intended to keep them going.

"I want you to work with the intelligence crews," Wachter told her, a week after their arrival at Morrison. "We're closer to the rebels now; we should start collecting better intelligence."

Penny was privately relieved. She had never been a very confrontational person before the Mind Techs had gone to work on her; now, she could barely endure raised voices when confronting a single person. Even hearing the Admiral chew out one of his new subordinates made her cringe inwardly, though she knew she wasn't the target. On the other hand, with someone praising her work and generally looking out for her, she found herself enjoying her career again. She couldn't help wondering, no matter how treacherous the thought was, if that freedom was what the rebels enjoyed.

There was no shortage of intelligence flowing into Morrison, but the intelligence officers had been either incompetent or focused on internal security. She wasn't surprised at that either; the crews stationed at Morrison had been so badly treated by their seniors that there were regular threats of mutiny and Marines had had to be deployed numerous times just to quieten them down. Admiral Wachter hadn't shuffled the crews *just* to break up bullying rings; he'd also hoped to prevent any planned mutiny from taking place. If the reports from Camelot were accurate, the force that should have defeated the rebels and reclaimed the planet had mutinied against its commanders.

It could happen here, Penny thought. *And we'd lose the war*.

She pushed the thought aside and turned to the intelligence. In hindsight, it was clear that the Thousand Families should have been tipped off before the Battle of Camelot. There were enough pieces of intelligence for someone to put the picture together, even though Percival had insisted on not reporting anything until the rebels were defeated. She gritted her teeth at the memory — if there was one thing good about the way she'd been treated, it was that she found it hard to think of the bastard — and started looking for anything that post-dated the battle. The rebels were definitely on the offensive.

But they had no choice, she knew. She'd gone over the figures time and time again. A long war suited the Empire, if only because it had a colossal production advantage. The rebels would know that too. They'd understand that their only chance for outright victory was to

press the offensive as hard as possible.

And yet they managed to take out the Jupiter Shipyards, she thought. *What happens if they take out the other two Class-III shipyards?*

She shook her head, dismissing the thought. The Empire could still replace them and start constructing new superdreadnaughts far faster than the rebels. It didn't change the balance of power, at least not in the short term. Or so she hoped.

"The intelligence is still outdated," she said, when Wachter stepped into her office. He'd given her a suite next to his, one intended for a Vice Admiral. She found it hard to imagine that *anyone* would need such a large suite. Even Percival hadn't brought along a small army of servants and pleasure slaves. "But it's clear they are advancing towards Morrison."

Wachter smirked, but there was no malice in it. "As anyone who could read a map could tell you."

Penny nodded. "I've been considering options," she said. She pointed to the star chart, indicating stars that were likely to be targeted specifically. "We could set small ambushes in these systems, trying to drain their forces."

"Chancy," Wachter said. "What would happen if we found ourselves out of place?"

It was a good question, Penny had to admit. And it was more insightful than anything Percival had ever said.

"We station two or three squadrons here, here and here," she said, altering the map so it showed flicker range. "We also station courier boats in each of the potential targets. When the rebels arrive, the boats jump out and summon the battle squadrons."

"We don't have the superdreadnaughts to spare," Wachter said, slowly. "I'd prefer not to deploy *any* of them until we have every last ship in good condition."

Penny nodded in agreement. Some of the superdreadnaughts orbiting Morrison were in such bad condition that cockroaches and rats had taken up residence in the tubes. The entire ship had had to be decompressed, then carefully cleaned to remove all traces of their presence before repairs could begin. They'd even started to chew through sealed compartments and destroy valuable components. The Admiral was right. They didn't dare risk sending out the superdreadnaughts until they had the entire formation in acceptable condition.

"Still, we can deploy battlecruisers, maybe even heavy cruisers," Wachter said. "Get in, land a blow or two, then get out. At the very least, the rebels would have to cover their flanks."

"We could also send ships up towards Jackson's Folly and raid their rear," Penny added. "It would be risky, because we would lose

track of the ships, but it might be worthwhile."

Wachter hesitated, studying the chart. "Goddamned Roosevelt Family," he muttered, unpleasantly. "What were they *thinking* when they installed so many defences and industrial nodes?"

Penny hesitated, then gave the answer she'd deduced. "They wanted to fight a civil war."

"It looks like they succeeded," Wachter grunted. "And they've made life harder for the rest of us."

He looked down at the chart. "I think we'd be better off withholding that until after we've given the rebels a bloody nose," he added. "Organise a couple of heavy squadrons — nothing heavier than battlecruisers — for your ambush scheme. See if we can get in a couple of blows, then force them to shoot off their missiles. Even if they recover them it will still cost them time."

"Yes, sir," Penny said. Being given general orders made her feel proud. She wasn't being micromanaged, merely being told what he wanted accomplished and expected to work the rest out for herself. "Will you require me later this evening."

Wachter hesitated. "I have ordered myself to watch the lashings," he said. "I issued the orders. I can't *not* watch."

Penny shivered. Lashing was technically legal, but very rare. It was more common to dock a crewman's pay, demote them a grade or simply reassign them. But several of the bullies had tried to reassert themselves, clearly not taking the Admiral's warning seriously. Perhaps a public lashing would help them learn the error of their ways.

"You should lash the commanding officers too," she said, remembering Percival. "They deserve it."

Wachter nodded, then shook his head. A poor commander generally meant a poor crew, but commanders couldn't be treated like ordinary crewmen. They were expected to maintain a certain dignity at all times. In Penny's opinion, far too many of the commanders at Morrison didn't deserve the title, but there was no helping it. There were only a handful of potential replacements.

"We'll start formal exercises tomorrow," Wachter added. "Hopefully, a few of the worst will prove themselves incompetent and give me a chance to remove them. You can command the opposing force."

He smiled. "Just remember what I told you," he concluded. "Make them *work* for their victory."

Chapter Ten

Commander Ira Dennison stared around his command centre, feeling — again — a sensation of total despair. Fairfax had been intended to serve as a shipping hub, but the economic slowdown had diminished the system's importance long before the rebellion had started in Sector 117. Ira was far too young and junior to be in command of the mighty orbital fortress, yet he'd been given no choice. His former commanding officer had departed the system soon after the Battle of Camelot for 'consultations.' It was rather more likely, Ira knew, that the bastard had weighed the odds and decided to leave before the rebels landed on the system like a ton of bricks.

It was quite likely to happen, he knew. Fairfax had a small shipyard, a couple of industrial nodes and a planetary population that chafed under outside rule. The only thing keeping the planet from a general uprising was the hulking presence of the orbital battlestation, which could hammer the planet back into the Stone Age if Ira felt like it. But there were times when he had his doubts. Which side should he be on?

The Empire hadn't been bad to him, he had to admit. He'd passed through the Academy and gone out to serve in Fortress Command, with a handful of commanding officers who hadn't been too bad to the newly-minted Ensign. Even the coward who'd fled hadn't been an unpleasant person. Ira had heard whispered stories of abuses, but he'd never seen any of them personally. Fortress Fairfax-One — Fortress Command was not noted for imagination when it came to naming its fortresses — was a reasonably happy orbital fortress. It just happened to be sitting right in the path of the rebel advance.

Ira had tried to convince himself that the system would remain untouched, but he knew better than to believe it. The shipyard alone was worth capturing, while the industrial nodes would help support the rebel war effort. Besides, there was an entire planet of potential rebels under the fortress's guns. He would sooner expect the rebels to commit suicide than leave Fairfax alone. Even if it couldn't threaten their supply lines, it could serve as a base to starships that would.

An alarm chimed. He jerked upright, his eyes searching the display. There had been almost no visitors to the system in the months since they'd heard of the Battle of Camelot. The only movement had been STL interplanetary transports carrying ore from the asteroid field to the industrial nodes. Now… several red icons had blinked into existence, a safe distance from the planet. Others were appearing too, spreading out into a crude but effective formation.

"I'm reading twenty-seven superdreadnaughts and forty smaller

ships," the tactical officer said. She sounded stunned. Like most of Fortress Command's personnel, she had never seriously expected a major attack on the worlds they guarded. "They're generating enough ECM to make it hard to be sure we're seeing them all."

"Good work, Bianca," Ira said. The rebels weren't even *trying* to hide. Were they that overconfident or did they want him to *think* that they were overconfident? Ira hadn't been allowed access to the sealed personnel files, so he knew almost nothing about the rebel commander. "Bring our systems to full alert, then load missile tubes."

Bianca looked up at him in surprise. She was junior to him by six months — which hadn't stopped them from moving in together as soon as they'd realised that regulations were unlikely to matter any longer. Fortress Command had always been more laid back about interpersonal relationships than the Imperial Navy, although rumour suggested that the navy was also more given to having illicit relationships.

"Commander," she said carefully, "there are twenty-seven *superdreadnaughts* out there."

"I know," Ira said. It was unlikely the ECM hid more superdreadnaughts, although he had to admit it was possible. "But we can't just surrender."

* * *

Colin forced himself to relax as the Shadow Fleet settled down into hammerhead formation. There was no way to know what the defenders had in mind for Fairfax; they might surrender at once, they might fire off a handful of shots and then surrender… or they might fight to the death. Fortress Command had never been noted for defiance in the face of overwhelming power, but they were holding an entire planet in bondage. They had to suspect that the locals would tear them apart if planetary bombardment was no longer a factor.

"One orbital fortress, Class-VIII; confirmed," the tactical officer said. "Nine automated weapons and sensor platforms; confirmed. No military starships within detection range."

"Lock weapons on target," Colin ordered. Unlike a superdreadnaught, the orbital fortress couldn't hope to run. He'd once sneaked up on an enemy fortress and blasted it from point-blank range, but it was unlikely that trick would work again. By now, the entire Empire would know which superdreadnaughts had fallen into rebel hands. "And transmit our demand for surrender."

He waited as the signal pulsed out, wondering just what the enemy officers were thinking. It was possible they'd surrender at once,

of course, or they might hold out for guarantees. Colin wouldn't hesitate to offer them, if asked. Like he'd told his crew, time and time again, accepting surrenders only to break them ensured that no one would surrender in future.

"No response," the communications officer said. "I didn't even pick up an automated reply."

Colin sighed. Exchanging missile fire with an orbital fortress was always dangerous. The fortresses packed more firepower than a superdreadnaught, while there was a small but very real danger that one of the missiles would strike the planet at a reasonable percentage of the speed of light. It would be utterly disastrous for the planet, all the more so as neither side in the war could hope to organise relief efforts in time to save even a small percentage of the population.

"Illuminate the targeting locks," he ordered. The enemy wouldn't be able to miss *that*, even though it would also allow them to precisely target *Colin's* ships. "And then prepare to fire."

* * *

"Ira," Bianca snapped, "why are you prepared to die? Honour before fucking reason?"

Ira stared at her, remembering long nights in their shared cabin. "What… what do you mean?"

Bianca's lip curled with contempt. "Commodore Ugly fled the moment he realised that this planet was under threat," she sneered. "Are you going to fight and die for the Empire, which abandoned you here, or are you going to do the smart thing and surrender?"

"We have a duty," Ira protested, cursing their relationship. And, for that matter, just how close in rank they were. He didn't have the gravitas of an older commanding officer and knew it. "We can't just surrender…"

He shuddered, recalling some of the whispered tales that had reached their ears. The rebels were murderers, rapists and cannibals. Those who had been captured had been killed, those who had surrendered had been brutally raped and then killed… there was no shortage of horror stories. But she was right. If they stood and fought, the battle wouldn't last very long at all. The superdreadnaughts were already targeting his hull openly. Twenty-seven superdreadnaughts could put out enough firepower to win the engagement very quickly.

"Please," Bianca said. "You don't deserve to die just because your superiors have abandoned you."

Ira winced. His life wasn't the only one at risk. He didn't want Bianca to die, let alone any of the others on the station. They were his

friends, even though he was their nominal commander. He didn't want them to die uselessly…

He keyed the console. "This is Commander Dennison," he said, shortly. "If I surrender, what terms are you prepared to offer?"

* * *

Colin checked the files before answering. Commander Dennison was young, barely twenty-five, although his file didn't suggest strong aristocratic connections or patronage. Maybe he'd just been lucky; Fortress Command wasn't as badly riddled with patronage as the Imperial Navy. But at that age… he shouldn't have been in command at all. The file stated that Commodore Uzi should have been in command.

"A question first," he said. "What happened to Commodore Uzi?"

There was no mistaking the disgust in the young man's voice. "He left shortly after we received word of Camelot," Dennison said. "We haven't seen him since."

Fled like a scalded cat, Colin translated, mentally.

He smiled, then pressed on. "Marines will board your station and secure the vital points," he said. "If you wish to join us, you will be welcome. If not, you will have the option of being shipped to an internment camp or transferred back to the Empire at the earliest opportunity. Anyone on the ground who wishes to leave with us will be provided with transport; anyone who wishes to remain can do so. My rather strong advice would be to leave."

There was a pause. Commander Dennison said nothing.

"One other point," Colin added. "I expect you to keep your surrender. If there is any attempt to trick my forces, ambush them or otherwise impede them in the performance of their duties they have full authority to use lethal force."

"I understand," Dennison said. "We won't offer any resistance."

He looked down at his console, then tapped a switch. "Launch the Marine shuttles," he ordered. "I want that station in our hands by the end of the hour."

* * *

Ira felt butterflies in his stomach as the two shuttles disengaged from the mass of enemy warships and headed towards the station. He'd often asked himself, when he'd been a young trainee, just what he would do if faced with a hopeless situation. But all of his dreams of

a noble last stand had left out the simple fact that he wouldn't be alone. Bianca and all of the others were standing there with him — and they would die if the rebels destroyed the station.

He keyed his console, searching for appropriate words. His mouth felt dry; he had to swallow twice before he could speak. "I have surrendered the fortress to the rebels," he said, shortly. Fortress Command was nowhere near as compartmentalised as the Imperial Navy. Even the lowest crewman knew that they were facing impossible odds. "They will be boarding us shortly. Everyone not on the command deck is to assemble in the lower shuttlebay, leaving weapons and anything that can be used as weapon behind.

"I have entered into the log," he added, suiting actions to words, "that the decision to surrender was mine and mine alone. No action should be taken against any of you if you return to the Empire. The rebels have offered us a chance to choose where we go afterwards; I will not attempt to dictate your choice."

He paused, searching for other words. "Don't argue about this, please," he concluded. "It isn't just our lives at stake."

His hand fell off the console, closing the channel. Bianca gave him a long look, then a faintly reassuring smile. Ira remembered all the horror stories and shivered, praying that he hadn't made a dreadful mistake. One fourth of the crew was female. If the rumours were actually true, he might have condemned them to a fate worse than death.

On the display, the shuttles came closer and closer.

* * *

"All right, you apes," Sergeant O'Neil snapped. "Remember what I told you — and don't fuck up. I'll kick the ass of anyone who fucks up, then the CO will discharge whatever's left of you out an airlock. Do you understand me?"

Corporal Sidney Harris joined in the shouts of understanding. He'd grown up on a lawless asteroid in the Beyond, he'd killed his first man at the age of eight — and somehow the Sergeant still managed to intimidate him. But then, the Sergeant had taken all the new recruits into a large hall during their first training session and invited any of them who wanted to try and kick his ass to take their best shot. After four hulking bravos had been knocked down one by one, the new recruits had shut up and started to learn. Sidney had been lucky enough to be seen distinguishing himself when the imps had attacked Sanctuary Asteroid. It had earned him a promotion to Corporal and command of four privates.

He checked his assault rifle, then his armour, as the shuttle docked with the access hatch. It opened, allowing the Marines to flow into the station. Inside, it was deserted; the briefing had stated that the crew were currently in the shuttlebay, apart from two on the command deck. Sidney listened as the Sergeant barked orders, then followed him towards the command deck.

The interior of the station almost seemed eerie, compared to an asteroid that was over a hundred years old. Sidney had to snap at one of his men who seemed puzzled by the bare design, just before they reached the bridge. The hatch was already open, but the Marines advanced as if they expected an ambush. If the enemy were planning something, they wouldn't risk allowing the Marines to access the command network before springing the trap.

There were two people on the command deck, both absurdly young and unmarked compared to someone who had spent all his life in the Beyond. One of them was a young man, with a slightly unfinished face and a weak chin; the other was a dark-haired girl with violet eyes and an expression that suggested she wasn't as confident as she pretended. The Marines searched them both, then secured their hands and put them in the corner to wait while the techs took control of the station. Sidney angled to stay on the command deck, but the Sergeant detailed him and his men to join the teams searching the station from top to bottom. Twenty minutes later, it was declared secure.

"Escort the prisoners to the shuttles," the Sergeant ordered, once Sidney returned to the command deck. "And well done."

Sidney nodded, although he had his doubts. They'd faced no opposition, no one inclined to actually fight. The next time they boarded a station or a starship, someone might fight back. And then they would really be tested.

"Yes, sir," he said.

* * *

Ira had been nervous even before the Marines entered the compartment and searched them both, gently but firmly. After their hands had been bound, he'd worried more… until they were escorted down and into the shuttles, along with the rest of the crew. No one seemed hurt, although several of the younger crewmen looked worried. They'd all heard the rumours.

"You need to make up your minds soon," the rebel who greeted them said, once they'd been transferred to another starship. "If you want to join us, you would be welcome. If you want to go back to the

Empire, or go to an internment camp, it can be arranged. But you will have to make up your minds before we depart, or we'll assume the camp."

"I've already decided," Bianca said. "I'd like to join you."

Ira hesitated, then made up his mind.

* * *

"All forty of the fortress crew joined up," Sergeant O'Neil said. "I guess they were unhappy about being abandoned and left to die."

"Smart of them," Colin said. He would have been astonished if any of them *wanted* to return to the Empire. They'd be blamed for not stopping an unstoppable foe. "And the people on the ground?"

"There's a lot of complaints about the uplift," Colonel Yamato reported, through the intercom. He didn't sound very happy with his lot. Securing a planet — even just the cities — took several divisions; Yamato had a regiment at best, none of which were well-trained. "The locals think we should just let the administrators be killed."

Colin wasn't surprised. There were only a handful of worlds were the administrators were popular — and most of them were places so poor that there was little for the Empire to take. If the fortress hadn't been there, the administrators would have been lynched already. But he'd made the deal and he intended to stick to it.

"Tell the locals that we need to interrogate the bastards," he said. It was true enough, although Colin would have been astonished if the administrators had known anything of more than fleeting interest. They'd been isolated ever since the System CO had fled, taking his only destroyer with him. "And then have them shipped to the camp."

"Yes, sir," Yamato said. "I…"

He broke off as Colin's console chimed. "Sir, this is Sanderson," the tactical officer said. "We just picked up a flicker burst — an exit burst."

Colin's eyes narrowed. "What sort of burst?"

"A corvette, I think," Sanderson said. "She must have been lying doggo all this time, even before we arrived, just watching and waiting. And then she just jumped out."

"Taking tactical information with her," Colin said. The corvette would have been close enough to get an accurate count on how many ships were in his formation, although he'd been careful not to bring his entire fleet to Fairfax. "Interesting…"

He shook his head. There was little they could do about it, not now. Besides, their course towards Morrison was alarmingly predicable in any case. The enemy would just have their suspicions

confirmed. Colin had tried to think of alternatives, but they all involved giving the enemy more time to prepare.

"Remind everyone to be careful what they say in clear," he ordered. Someone had clearly been thinking hard, which suggested an unwelcome level of competence. Were there any battle formations within range? "And then inform the fleet that we will be departing to the first waypoint in two hours. We don't want to stay here any longer than strictly necessary."

He closed the channel, then stared down at the display, not really seeing it. Just who was in command of the Empire's forces — and how far were they prepared to go to win?

Chapter Eleven

"This is really quite unacceptable," Lord Rothschild protested. "To see our networks destroyed in such a manner is worse than unacceptable. It is *lethal*."

There was a dully mummer of agreement from some of the Family Heads. Tiberius couldn't help noticing that ones who agreed were the ones who held planets and property thousands of light years from the rebellion. They were all at risk, he knew, but the ones closer to the rebellion were more at risk than others. Not, in the end, that it would matter. If the Empire's economy crashed, everyone would suffer. They wouldn't even be able to pay their Household Troops, let alone their small armies of servants.

Someone had defied Admiral Wachter's communications blackout in the Morrison System and sent back a full report on the purge. Hundreds of senior officers had been removed, then effectively imprisoned on Morrison itself, rather than being sent back to face their superiors — and patrons — on Earth. In his own way, Admiral Wachter was making a statement to his subordinates; those who were responsible for the disgraceful state of a once-proud naval base were finally facing justice. But it was also a poke in the eye to their patrons, many of whom sat on the very highest council in the Empire.

Tiberius sighed as the discussion raged around him. On one hand, he could see Wachter's point; Morrison *was* a disgrace and the people responsible had to be punished, rather than entrusted with further responsibilities. But on the other hand, wiping out large chunks of the patronage network — several patronage networks — would alienate the Family Heads and rouse their suspicions that Wachter intended to turn against them. It certainly wouldn't encourage them to get on with choosing a supreme commander for Home Fleet. Seven weeks of debate and outright arguing had produced nothing, apart from vague generalities about each individual squadron preparing itself for battle

Not for the first time, he cursed Lord Roosevelt under his breath. His departure from the council — and the council's failure to nominate a replacement — ensured that they would remain deadlocked. Tiberius couldn't help thinking that simply appointing someone to the post should have been easy, particularly with the rebels breathing down their necks. Instead, the arguments had dragged on… and on… and on.

"This is your fault, Tiberius," Lord Rothschild snapped. "We might have empowered a monster."

Tiberius sighed and gathered himself. What was the point of being a Family Head if he couldn't speak bluntly from time to time?

“We operate the patronage network to ensure that none of us can control enough firepower to overwhelm the others,” he said, bluntly. “In doing so, we picked clients who would place our interests first, rather than the interests of the Imperial Navy or the Empire as a whole. Many of those clients developed smaller networks of their own, which we did not oppose because, in the end, those networks were ours. We chose to overlook the simple fact that those networks also caused decay within the system.”

He scowled, looking from face to face. They all considered him absurdly young — and they were right, in an Empire where the wealthy could expect to live for over two hundred years. And they thought of him as inexperienced, which was also true. He didn’t have the decades of experience each of them had in fine-tuning their patronage networks. But he liked to think that he had the galactic perspective they lacked.

“That was not a problem as long as we didn’t face a serious threat,” he said. They knew it, they had to know it, but it needed to be said. “But now we *do* face a threat, one that may well overwhelm us and destroy everything our ancestors have built. This is not the time to allow corruption and decay to damage the system. We have to get ready to fight for our lives — and half of us have forgotten *how*!

“We’ve never needed to really *fight* in living memory. It was easy to make the decision to annex Jackson’s Folly, even though it took years of arguing to make the decision we all knew was inevitable anyway. We have annexed dozens of other worlds, none of which could really hope to resist our overwhelming firepower. And if they took out a handful of smaller ships… so what? We had plenty more where they came from. As long as we held the biggest stick in the known universe, we never had to actually *fight*.

“But now we are facing a united rebel force that has superdreadnaughts of its own,” he reminded them. “We are facing people who want to destroy us and piss on the remains, who have access to the prospective new technologies of the Geeks and Nerds, who are the people we rejected *because* they had too much integrity or ambition to become part of our patronage networks. The enemy may be thousands of light years away, but our backs are pressed against the wall. By the time they get to Morrison, let alone Earth, we must be ready to face them!”

He took a deep breath. “If we fail to get ready,” he added, “we may as well surrender now and save time.”

“Surrender is not an option,” Lord Bernadotte snapped.

“Then we have to get ready to fight,” Tiberius snapped back. “Admiral Wachter is cleaning out people who have, put bluntly, helped to ruin a naval base we desperately need. Why exactly are we

objecting?"

"Because he could build a patronage network of his own, then turn on us," Lord Rothschild pointed out, in a tone that might be used to explain something to a particularly stupid child. "We have never trusted anyone with so much power since the Empress…"

"Except if we *don't* let him have his head, we will lose when the rebels arrive in orbit," Tiberius countered, feeling his face heat. "Tell me something. How many of the ordinary crewmen at Morrison would have switched sides if the rebels had reached them before Admiral Wachter?"

"None of them," Lord Bernadotte said. "They're loyal…"

He broke off as several listeners snorted rudely. They all knew that the first rebels had mutinied against their commanders — and that they'd been joined by others, thousands of others. The superdreadnaughts the rebels had taken couldn't have been operated without a full crew, certainly not in combat. No, this was worse than mutiny. Captured crews had switched sides without hesitation.

"I read the report very carefully," Tiberius said, pressing his advantage. "The ordinary crewmen lived hellish lives. Their pay was frequently delayed. They were at the mercy of bullying rings operated by stronger crewmen. Discipline, in short, was absolutely non-existent. And, lest we forget, several ships from Morrison *did* vanish when they heard the news of the rebellion. Why should the other crewmen *not* join the rebels?"

One of the older lords leaned forward. "Gratitude?"

"Try using gratitude on a dog that's been kicked once too often," Lady Madeline said. "We should try to forestall another series of mutinies through better treatment."

"We could also deploy more Blackshirts," Lord Bernadotte pointed out. "There's never any shortage of recruits."

Tiberius scowled. Blackshirts were good at teaching newly-occupied planets the futility of resistance, but they were unwelcome on older worlds and downright dangerous on starships. Between their ignorance, the drug-conditioning and general aggressive attitude, their mere presence provoked hatred and rage among the host population.

"But we are being forced to expand our training and conditioning programs," Lord Rothschild countered. "We simply cannot supply Blackshirts in enough numbers to keep threatened planets under control."

"We have no choice," Lord Bernadotte insisted. He stood to lose badly if the rebels continued their advance, or if worlds under his control revolted against outside authority. "The Blackshirts are one of the few trustworthy forces we have under our control."

"That's because they're addled into obedience," Lord Rothschild

reminded him. “You give a Blackshirt something out of the ordinary to handle and he’ll fall apart.”

“The conditioning keeps them loyal,” Lord Bernadotte snapped. “We need loyalty now, more than ever.”

Tiberius sighed. There were billions of Blackshirts in the Empire, which seemed a huge number until one actually looked at the map. Deploying them across thousands of separate planets meant that there were relatively few Blackshirts for each world, even if they were only deployed to the rebellious ones. Besides, the new demands on the imperial shipping network ensured that transporting Blackshirts — or anyone else, for that matter — would proceed slower than they might wish.

We cut out all the slack, he thought. It had never occurred to him just how tightly the Empire was bound together until they started trying to call up commercial spacers to serve in the military. Thousands had simply deserted, taking their ships with them; others had obeyed, reducing the number of freighters hauling fright between the stars. In hindsight, it might have been better to ask for volunteers rather than simply trying to conscript everyone they could. But it had been the first panicky reaction and by then the damage had been done.

He recalled the latest set of predictions from the family’s analysts. Unless something quite remarkable was done, interstellar shipping was going to slow down quite remarkably for years, shattering the economic bonds that held large parts of the Empire together. Even if the rebels were beaten tomorrow, they’d noted, it would be centuries before all the damage was repaired.

Irritated, he slapped the table. The others stopped arguing and glared at him.

“We need to gamble,” he said. “Admiral Wachter is the best naval officer currently at our disposal — and he’s right. Morrison *was* allowed to rot away, by the officers he has relieved of their duties and then imprisoned. There will be time enough afterwards to repair the patronage networks.”

Lord Rothschild gave Tiberius a long considering look. “And if you’re wrong about his loyalty?”

“There are precautions we can take,” Tiberius said, coldly. “But we also need to bear in mind, at all times, that our first priority is defeating the rebellion. Infighting only helps their cause.”

He paused, knowing that he had their complete and undivided attention. “And we need to break the logjam and appoint someone to serve as Home Fleet’s commander,” he added. “We have put the question of for far too long.”

“Pity no one knows what happened to the Empress,” Lord

Bernadotte muttered. His family had once been one of her supporters, at least until she'd actually declared herself Empress and claimed supreme power. "We could have used her."

"And then disposed of her," Lord Rothschild said. His family *hadn't* been among her supporters — and never let anyone forget it. "The problem is that we don't have a candidate."

"Then we find someone with actual experience and put them in the command seat," Tiberius said. "And then we can use the patronage networks to back them to the hilt."

He logged out of the meeting, torn between frustration and relief as the images vanished, leaving him alone in the secure chamber. It was so bloody *irritating* to go over the same issues time and time again, even if new evidence of Admiral Wachter's determination to clean house had arrived from Morrison. Why did they feel they could simply *talk* the rebellion out of existence? Tiberius asked himself, not for the first time, why so many of the Family Heads had even managed to reach their positions. It was rare for them to pull their heads out of their butts.

Gritting his teeth, he strode into his office and glared at one of the paintings hanging on the wall. Rumour had it that his great-grandfather had employed a whole troupe of people to help him blow off steam, although Tiberius rather hoped that the stories weren't actually true. He knew more than he wanted to know about the perversions practiced by the lesser aristocracy — even some in his own family — but he honestly didn't know how his great-grandfather had found the time. There was always something for the Family Head to do.

He rolled his eyes as Sharon stepped into his office, carrying the datapad. "I have the latest reports from the industrial nodes," she said. "Do you want a summery?"

Tiberius glared down at his hands. If only he dared trust one of his relatives to serve as an assistant. But he knew that none of them could be trusted to put the family's interests first, not when they would think they had a chance to unseat Tiberius. And they might be right, if they acted carefully. The appearance of weakness or folly might be enough to bring him down.

"Not really," he said, tiredly. "You'd better just let me read the full report."

* * *

Gaunt had told them, as she led the way through a network of disused passageways, stairwells and sealed apartments, that the

underground on Earth was literally underground, largely hidden under the towering cities. The omnipresent surveillance grew thinner and thinner under the ground, until there were large sections of the cities where there was no surveillance at all. Gaunt had added that youth gangs often made a game out of smashing surveillance devices, despite the harsh penalties if they were caught. It wasn't as if they had anything to look forward to in their lives.

The warehouse itself had been abandoned hundreds of years ago, she'd explained, when she'd led them into their new living quarters. It served as a gathering place for sharing tips and training, as well as neutral ground between the different underground organisations. It was also linked to countless possible escape routes, allowing the underground operatives to bug out if they believed they were under attack. Even a full regiment of Marines, Frandsen had noted, would find it hard to block *every* possible escape route.

"And we'd see them coming if they did," Gaunt told him, with a leer. "We have quite a few surprises set up for them if they try."

Gaunt worried Adeeba more than she cared to admit. The woman wasn't quite stable; indeed, there was an icy determination to *hurt* the enemy that seemed to override her common sense, let alone her understanding that the underground had to conserve its strength and strike decisive blows. Frandsen had told her that Gaunt had probably endured a full interrogation at one point, then escaped before they exiled or simply executed her. Gaunt had refused to talk about it at all when they'd asked, merely pointing to her scars and noting that she had scores she wanted to settle before she died.

It was hard to keep track of time in the underground. Adeeba knew that it had been two months since they had arrived on Earth, but each day seemed to blur into an endlessly repetitive pattern. The lightning never changed, no matter what they did. And it was growing harder and harder to tell the masked underground fighters apart. Frandsen could teach them everything from making homemade bombs to simple tactics, but Adeeba could only wait. If she hadn't been used to naval quarters, she suspected she would probably have cracked by now.

"I thought you grew up on Earth," Frandsen said, when she said that out loud. "This isn't as bad as some places."

"I grew up on the other side of the planet," Adeeba said, crossly. "And there was more to do than here."

The discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Gaunt and several masked figures, all of whom seemed to carry themselves with more authority than the younger men Frandsen had been trying to teach. Leaders, Adeeba guessed, wearing masks to conceal their identities. Their clothes were so baggy and shapeless that it was

impossible to tell if they were men or women. They even wore gloves to keep from leaving any fingerprints or DNA traces.

"You can call me Alpha," the leader said. "We have been collecting intelligence for you. In the course of doing so, we also stumbled across an opportunity to do the enemy considerable damage. We intend to deploy it within the week."

Adeeba hesitated. "Are you sure you can do it without provoking reprisals?"

"We believe that it will be impossible for them to prove it was us," Alpha said. "It will also leave hints that suggest that it was industrial sabotage, rather than anything else. However, there is a certain element of risk. We can expect them to tighten their precautions after the incident."

"And thus make intelligence-gathering harder in future," Adeeba said. The underground had picked up a great deal of intelligence, mostly concentrated on the Empire's mobilisation efforts. It would have been very useful for Colin, if they had been able to get it back to him in a reasonable timeframe. "What exactly will it do?"

"Hopefully, damage a number of computer cores," Alpha said. "They should feel the effects very quickly. Even once they work out what happened, it will still be hard to trace it back to us."

Adeeba exchanged a look with Frandsen, then nodded. The underground leaders wouldn't have brought it to them unless they'd already made up their minds to take the shot. If she said no… they didn't have to listen to her. All she could do was give them her blessing and hope it didn't rebound in their face.

"Good luck," she said, finally.

Gaunt rubbed her hands together. "We hit them tomorrow," she said. "And who knows what advantage we will be able to get out of the chaos?"

"If we're lucky, the imps will start blaming each other," Alpha said. "That can only help the cause."

Adeeba rolled her eyes. She'd never realised that the Thousand Families competed so savagely, but it made sense. The Empire no longer had the resources to invest in developing new colonies, certainly not ones that would start to pay off their loans quickly enough to be effective. They were scrabbling over a shrinking pie.

"Let's hope so," she agreed. "Let us know what happens."

Chapter Twelve

Marian Fairchild stopped outside her apartment door and fumbled in her pocket for the keys. The fingerprint scanner was broken again, thanks to the youth gangs that roamed this part of Luna City, and she had to use the manual way. She cursed the little bastards under her breath as she opened the door. Somehow, her rank as a Mid-Level Programmer in the Cicero Industrial Plant didn't entitle her to an apartment on a higher level, even though her boss had told her that she was one of his most valuable employees and he wasn't going to let her seek promotion or a transfer. Instead, she had to put up with the gangs damaging her door and praying that they wouldn't decide to break in one day. Both of her daughters were just too vulnerable when she wasn't in the apartment.

Inside, she glanced at herself in the mirror, scowling when she saw the dark shadows encircling her eyes. Any hope of a date with a hot man had vanished when her boss had told them all that they would be working double shifts from now on, leaving her tired and exhausted when she staggered home every day. Her dark hair was already starting to thin, she realised, or at least it looked that way. And there was no way she could afford a cosmetics treatment when she also had to pay for the girls…

Her blood ran cold as she realised what she was missing. The girls. They were normally noisy, playing that dreadful racket that passed for modern music every time she came home, but now the apartment was quiet. She peeked into the bedroom they shared and saw no one; indeed, the room didn't look to have been entered since she'd sent them both to school in the morning. The small picture of their father — the only memento they'd had of a man who had walked out on them shortly after they were born — was still where they'd left it, positioned neatly so he could overlook their bed. It gave them enough comfort that Marian had never had the heart to remove it.

But there was no sign of the girls. Feeling a cold tremor running through her heart, she glanced into the living room and kitchen and saw nothing. They normally took a drink from the fridge as soon as they returned home, but there were no traces of anything having been taken. In fact, there was nothing to suggest that the girls had ever come home.

They were teenagers, with all of the rebellious impulses that implied, but they knew better than to stay out after school. They'd always come home before, even when they'd wanted to go stay with a friend for a few hours. She'd trusted them to understand the dangers…

She stared in horror, her imagination providing her with all kinds

of horrifying possibilities, each one nastier than the last. The girls were thirteen and fourteen, respectively; there were slave or prostitution rings that would pay dearly for such young girls. Or they could simply have been raped and murdered by the gangs. Or…

The communicator rang. She stumbled towards it, pressed her thumb against the scanner, and activated the device. There was no caller ID, nothing to show who was calling or why. Normally, she would not have bothered to answer, but now… she couldn't escape the feeling that it might be connected to the girls. Perhaps the security guards had found them…

"Good afternoon, Marian," a voice said. It was completely atonal, probably computer-generated. "You will be wondering, by now, what has happened to your kids. We have them."

Marian stared down at the blank screen. "Who *are* you?"

"It doesn't matter," the voice informed her. "What *does* matter is what you are going to do for us."

"I don't have money," Marian said, feeling her life shattering around her. If she went for a loan, now, it was unlikely she could get more than a few thousand credits. And how did she know the kidnappers would return her children after she paid the ransom? "What do you want?"

"If you look under the sofa," the voice said, "you will find a datachip. We expect you to take that chip with you tomorrow, then upload the program to the main computer network and activate it. Destroy the datachip once you have used it. Should you do so, your children will be returned to you alive and unharmed. If not… well, you will never see your children again."

Marian hesitated, unable to speak. She knew the dangers of uploading a program of unknown origin, everyone did. It wouldn't just cost her the job if she was discovered; it would ensure that she spent the rest of her life on a penal colony, while her children would be taken away and given to someone else to raise. If, of course, the kidnappers didn't kill them anyway, no matter what they'd promised.

And yet… they were her *children*.

She could go to her boss, she knew. It was certainly what she was *supposed* to do. But she knew better than to think her children could be rescued, not when the corporation's main interests would be securing itself. She would go into a holding cell, the datachip would be examined carefully and the children would be left to fend for themselves. There might be an attempt to arrest the kidnappers, but they wouldn't be too worried about the children. What should she do? What *could* she do?

"Your choice," the voice told her. "We'll know if you upload the program. If you do, your kids will be freed. If not, you will lose them

forever."

"I will," Marian promised. She knew she couldn't trust her boss to take care of her children. Besides, if the kidnappers expected immediate results from whatever program was on the datachip, they'd know she'd tried to alert the authorities. "Just don't hurt them, please."

The line broke. Marian stared down at it, cursing herself. She should have asked for proof they were still alive, proof the kidnappers even had them… she stepped back, then walked over to the sofa and looked underneath it. As promised, a simple civilian-grade datachip was waiting for her. She picked it up and examined it, but saw nothing. The only way to know what was on the chip was to examine it in a computer. And doing that, she knew, might trigger the program.

Putting the chip in her pocket, she walked over to the fridge and removed a bottle of cheap wine she'd picked up for the times her job felt like too much. Taking a large swig, she sat down on the sofa and closed her eyes, trying to put the whole thing out of her mind. But images of her children kept floating up in front of her, some memories from when they were little girls, some her imagination showing her what might happen to them. Sickened, she curled up in a ball and tried to sleep. It didn't come easily.

The following morning, she had to force herself to shower and swallow two pills before she could even leave the apartment. Some of her friends greeted her as she boarded the transport tube for the ride to the plant; she had to force herself to act normally, knowing that if they reported her she was doomed. The security staff wouldn't thank her for bringing the datachip into the office, even though it was safe as long as it wasn't actually inserted into a computer. She felt sweat running down her back as she got out of the tube and walked through the security gate with the others, wondering if the guards could sense her guilt. But no one tried to stop her as she entered the complex and made her way to her own office.

It *was* a good job, even though it was tedious at times. Everything from starships to orbital fortresses and industrial nodes required computer cores, which were produced and given their first programming at Luna Base. Marian was surprised that demand hadn't fallen, despite the destruction of the Jupiter Shipyards, but apparently there were shortfalls everywhere. Or, as some of the techs had muttered when they thought they couldn't be overhead, the immense corporation had simply failed to cancel orders even though they no longer needed them.

She sat down in front of her desk and activated the computer, silently grateful that she hadn't run into her boss. Her job — along

with hundreds of others — was monitoring the prime programming inserted into computer cores, then certifying them for shipment. It was a difficult task at the best of times, particularly when the techs were experimenting with newer non-standard pieces of software. Even the ban on innovation outside the labs wasn't enough to stop them.

Carefully, she pulled the datachip from her pocket and inserted it into the slot. There was a long pause, just long enough for her to wonder if the chip had been prepared properly, then the screen blinked up a note. PROGRAM ACTIVE. Marian shuddered, then blanked it from her screen and went to work. She took the datachip as soon as it was expelled and threw it into the disposer. All physical evidence would be gone by the end of the hour.

She caught sight of her boss and winced. The man wasn't as bad as some of the others she'd had, certainly not compared to the one who'd spent most of her time trying to get into her panties. But she'd betrayed him, as badly as anyone had ever been betrayed. It the chip was truly dangerous, it wouldn't be just *her* neck that paid the price…

* * *

Colin Venture had endured an astonishing amount of teasing from his colleges since the name of the rebel leader had leaked out. They'd asked him when he planned to rebel, then why hadn't be rebelled yet and finished by demanding to know why he hadn't led a commando raid on the kitchens and secured some good food for once. Normally, by the time the manufacture crews were back on the station, the good food was gone. Colin had ended up punching the loudest loudmouth in the face, which had resulted in him being given extra EVA duty.

His supervisor didn't seem to realise that it wasn't exactly a punishment. Colin loved drifting in space, watching as the automated systems slowly put the starship together. There was little for him to do, unless something went very badly wrong. Indeed, he wasn't entirely sure why they bothered with EVA operators at all. Maybe it was just some long-forgotten safety precaution that had never been repealed, even though it was outdated…

There was a sudden crackle on his radio, then silence. Moments later, the suit's internal life support system — an ever-present background hum — faded away to nothingness. Colin blinked in surprise, then hit the reset button. Nothing happened. Panic flickered at the corner of his mind as he realised the oxygen was going to run out… then he looked up at the shipyard. The whole system seemed to have gone crazy. Each of the giant automated arms was now tearing into the starship they had been building, ripping it apart piece by

piece. The whole superstructure was coming apart.

And it was suddenly very hard to breathe.

* * *

The alarms went off just as Marian and her co-workers were about to take their lunch break. Grumbling, they stood and made their way to the emergency shelters, even though there was no hint of just what had gone wrong. Marian had a feeling she already knew. Their system was intimately connected to thousands of other systems, while her workstation had clearance to access most of them without needing passwords to break through the firewalls. It wasn't meant to be that way, but it was efficient. All of a sudden, she had a feeling that efficiency was about to bite her ultimate employers on the backside.

It was nearly an hour before they received any word from their superiors. "There has been a chaos attack on the main computer datanet," the boss informed them. His face looked pale and sweaty in the dim light. "So far, forty-two people are reported dead. We have no idea just how much money has been lost, but it is certainly over a billion credits."

Marian blanched. What had she done?

"Work has been cancelled for the day," the boss continued. A low cheer ran through the compartment. "Security Techs are currently investigating the source of the chaos attack. If any of you have any suspicions you wish to share with them, please do so when you are interviewed. I must remind you that failure to cooperate will be taken as grounds for a full interrogation, even if you are innocent."

He turned and left the compartment. Marian watched him go, thinking hard. Chaotic attacks, by their very nature, were extremely difficult to pinpoint because the virus erased all traces of its passage before it attacked. In theory, it should be impossible to identify her workstation as the source of the attack. But in practice… she had no idea. Would the designers have bothered to ensure her identity was protected? If they hadn't, she was likely to find herself under arrest shortly — and she would never see her children again.

* * *

Tiberius looked down at the report, bitterly. "*How* much damage?"

"The chaos virus caused one hell of a lot of damage," Hanno said. She was the family's expert on computer security, one of the few

people everyone trusted. “Right now, over seventy people have died. We also lost about five billion credits worth of infrastructure and starship hulls — so far.”

Tiberius blinked. “So far?”

“This was a particularly nasty virus,” Hanno told him. “The designers ensured that it infiltrated every processor it could reach, but it didn’t go active everywhere. Right now, there are processors that have to be regarded as suspect, even though they worked as designed throughout the crisis. I think we will simply have to strip them all out and destroy the units rather than trying to recycle them. There may be fragments left behind even if we completely reformat the processors. Replacing them all is going to be a headache.

“Then there’s the manufacturing complex itself,” she added. “Is that trustworthy or is it going to start churning out chaos-infected processor nodes. And then we have to ask ourselves how long the virus infected our system before it went active. We produce hundreds of processors a week. How many of them are infected?”

Tiberius blanched. At the very least, the family’s reputation had just taken a bloody nose; at worst, they would have to replace thousands of computer processors, including ones that hadn’t been infected during the first outbreak, but might have been infected by now.

“Give me some good news,” he said. “Do we have anyone to blame yet?”

“Not so far,” Hanno said. “We do know the virus was inserted from a workstation inside the firewalls, but that only narrows it down to thousands of possible suspects. I believe that the security officers are currently carrying out interrogations — gentle interrogations. But we don’t know if this was a lone protester, someone connected to the underground — or someone linked to the rebellion.”

“Or both,” Tiberius said. “The rebels are bound to make contact with the underground here, aren’t they?”

He scowled at the thought. The underground was very good at hiding, unsurprisingly. They had plenty of experience. The ones who didn’t learn how to avoid attracting attention died, sometimes at the hands of their fellows. They knew they couldn’t risk bringing the full might of the Empire down on their heads.

“Almost certainly,” Hanno agreed. She straightened upright. “With your permission, I will return to my station. We have already barred all further shipments of computer cores from Luna, but we have no idea how far the problem has already spread.”

“No, we don’t,” Tiberius agreed.

He watched her go, then turned to stare out of the window overlooking the High City. The Families Council was going to be very

sarcastic about the whole affair; by now, they would have at least a general idea of what had gone wrong. And, once the full story sank in, they would be reluctant to use anything from the factories. Tiberius couldn't blame them for it, but right now they didn't have a choice. They *had* to get Home Fleet up and running before the rebels arrived.

And that, he reasoned, proved that the rebels were involved. It was hard to see how the underground benefited, but the rebels certainly did. Unless, of course, they had already made an alliance. The rebels could easily have dispatched couriers of their own from Sector 117 to Earth, perhaps even before the Battle of Camelot.

He shook his head, bitterly. There was no point in worrying. All they could do was tighten security and hope it was enough to prevent a second disaster.

* * *

The questioning had actually been quite mild. Marian kept her eyes lowered and answered in a monotone, hoping and praying that they weren't using sensors to monitor her vital signs. But they didn't grab her and throw her into a cell. Instead, they told her she could leave the complex and take two days break. She couldn't tell if it was intended as a reward for putting up with their confinement or if her superiors wanted to bring in others to sweep the offices.

Back home, she discovered her children. They'd been brought in, somehow, and left tied up on their beds. Marian pulled them into her arms and started to cry. They hugged her back, awkwardly, as soon as she untied them.

"They didn't touch us," Gayle assured her. "They just told us that you would have to pay."

"I did," Marian admitted. "I paid for your safe return."

And then she started to cry again.

Chapter Thirteen

"Enemy fleet approaching, sir," Penny said, as the exercise began. "I read fifty-two superdreadnaughts, nine arsenal ships and seventy-nine smaller ships."

"Good," Wachter said. "Let's see how this goes."

Penny flinched at his tone, even though his anger wasn't directed at her. The first two exercises they'd carried out had been absolute disasters, mitigated only by the awareness that they'd identified a pair of incompetent officers who had thoroughly deserved being removed from command. A third officer had been shot for disobeying orders in the face of the enemy, which Wachter had sardonically pointed out would have been forgiven if his disobedience had actually led to a victory. Instead, it had cost a dozen superdreadnaughts.

Or it would have, if it had been real, Penny thought. *The rebels could have knocked Morrison over with a squadron of battlecruisers and bad intentions*.

She leaned back in her chair, watching as the Morrison Fleet settled down into the compact formation they'd devised for coping with mass missile swarms. There should have been four hundred starships in the formation, but seventy-two of them were still being repaired after competent crews had been assigned to man them. Several starships had been pronounced so wasted that they'd had to be cannibalised, then shipped to the breakers. It was chilling to realise that a few more years would have seen the entire squadron waste away.

"Enemy fleet is locking weapons on us," the tactical officer reported. "I can't break the locks."

Penny smiled. She had no idea how many improvements the Geeks could or would make to rebel sensor systems, but she'd ramped up the simulation enemy's capabilities as much as possible. It would be impossible to hide from them without using a cloaking device — and that would pose its own problems when so many starships were in close proximity.

"Hold formation," Wachter ordered. "Let them come to us."

The first time they'd held the exercise, the incompetent commanders had panicked and ordered their squadrons to scatter. It hadn't surprised Penny when the simulated rebels had obliterated them — or when the commanders had claimed, afterwards, that the exercise had been a fraud. After all, they hadn't known the outcome in advance. Wachter had countermanded the orders quickly, but not quickly enough to prevent the rebels from defeating them.

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. "Missile range in seven

minutes."

Penny sucked in her breath. It wasn't easy to bring an enemy fleet to battle, not when the flicker drive allowed the enemy to disengage and vanish if the battle seemed to be turning against him. The only way to force an enemy to fight was to target somewhere they had to defend, ensuring that the enemy had no choice but to stand and fight. She'd seen that proven often enough as the rebels had danced around Admiral Percival, eventually bringing the full weight of their fleet to bear against Camelot. And then the rebels themselves had had to defend Camelot against attack.

She watched, dispassionately, as the two fleets converged. The enemy commander would probably hold fire until they reached a closer range… unless, of course, the simulation had thought of something new. It wasn't really innovative — true AI was banned, after the first few attempts at producing it had ended badly — but it was quite capable of surprising people.

"Missile separation," the tactical officer snapped. Once again, Penny watched as an impossible wave of missiles roared towards her formation. "I read…"

He broke off. "I read over thirty *thousand* missiles, sir," he said. "I…"

"Return fire," Wachter ordered, calmly. "And then reformat the formation for efficient point defence."

The massive superdreadnaught rocked as it unleashed its first barrage, emptying the external racks and then launching missiles from the internal tubes. It looked puny compared to the sheer throw weight of the arsenal ships, although Penny knew that they had fewer targets. Once they had shot their bolt, the arsenal ships were useless until they could reload. She wasn't surprised to see them flicker out as soon as their drives recycled.

"All point defence systems online," the tactical officer said. "Missiles will enter engagement envelope in ninety seconds…"

Penny watched as the timer ticked down to zero. Wachter had redesigned the formation entirely, placing three-quarters of his smaller craft in position to shield the superdreadnaughts. He'd even added gunboats to the formation, although Penny knew that the gunboats would be lucky to get one or two shots off before the missiles roared past them. The ECM might offer more attractive targets to the missiles, she hoped. A missile that wasted itself on an ECM drone pretending to be a superdreadnaught was one that wouldn't hammer against a *real* superdreadnaught.

The display seemed to flare with light as the point defence opened fire. Missiles had no shields, nothing to protect them from a direct hit apart from speed and sheer weight of numbers. But the

rebels had fired so many that even wiping out two-thirds of them wouldn't save the Morrison Fleet from taking heavy damage. Penny gritted her teeth as several superdreadnaughts were overwhelmed and destroyed in quick succession, their crews too inexperienced to evade the missiles or simply flicker out when their shields started to collapse. Other ships ran up damage rapidly, including a pair of superdreadnaughts that fell out of formation and lagged behind. Their drives had been badly damaged. One of them would be lucky to make it back to the repair yard under her own power.

"Enemy fleet has taken damage, sir," the tactical officer said.

Wachter sighed. "Underling's descriptive inability syndrome again?"

Penny smiled, even though the tactical officer was flushing bright right. It was a long-standing joke that underlings only gave vague reports, a joke that lost its humour when she'd realised that giving an accurate report might result in being shot for bringing bad news. She glanced down at her display and smiled to herself. Four enemy superdreadnaughts had been destroyed, two more had been badly damaged. Several smaller ships had vanished without trace.

But the rebels were still steering towards the Morrison Fleet. Either they were confident of winning a missile duel or they had something else up their sleeves.

"Hold the range open," Wachter ordered. There was no point in closing to energy range when the Morrison Fleet held the missile advantage. Now the arsenal ships had shot their load, the rebels had fewer launchers and no external racks. "Continue firing."

There were Admirals, Penny knew, who would have seen their manoeuvre as a retreat. The rebels *were* trying to push closer to them, after all, which forced the fleet to fall back against Morrison. But it *was* working. The rebels were inflicting damage, yes, but they were taking damage too. By the time Wachter could no longer fall back, they would be ground down to dust.

The rebel commander apparently agreed. For a moment, his missile tubes seemed to fall silent — and then his fleet simply flickered out, leaving the defenders in possession of the system. Penny hesitated, wondering if that was the end… and then the END EX signal blinked up on the display. The crew surprised her by cheering, although she had to admit it shouldn't have been a surprise. It was the first victory they'd won against any opponent, simulated or not.

"Well done, everyone," Wachter said. He looked over at Penny. "Have that broadcast to every ship in the fleet."

"Yes, sir," Penny said. *Percival* wouldn't have bothered… but Wachter wasn't Percival. "Do you want a full breakdown of the results?"

“Later, perhaps,” Wachter said. He stood up. “I want you to join me in my office. We have a great deal to discuss.”

Penny couldn’t help feeling nervous as she followed him off the tactical deck and down to the Admiral’s compartment. If Percival had wanted her to join him in his office, she would have known what *that* meant. But Wachter wasn’t Percival. All he did, as soon as they were inside the compartment, was wave her to a chair and pour two glasses of a red-coloured wine.

“Mars Brandy,” he said, as he passed her a glass. “A hundred years old, according to the seller. I was saving it for a special occasion.”

Penny took a sip, then almost choked. Mars produced a small number of alcoholic drinks, but most of them were very expensive as well as heavily alcoholic. Something in the genetic modifications offered to the original settlers had given them a strong head for drink as well as resistance to muscular decay. But back then they hadn’t known as much as they did now about modifying the baseline human body.

“Be careful,” Wachter advised. “It can be strong if you’re not ready for it.”

“Tastes smoky,” Penny decided, after another sip. Percival had never wasted the good stuff on her, even though his servants had spent thousands of credits each month filling his wine cabinet. “What are we celebrating?”

“The fleet didn’t do too badly today,” Wachter said. “We might just be able to stand the rebels off from the planet. If we get lucky. If the rebels don’t come up with any new surprises.”

“Yes, sir,” Penny said. “They’re still going to come here, of course.”

Wachter nodded. Nothing they’d done had changed the basic equation. Morrison was in a perfect position to impede the rebel advance, raid their supply lines and generally make a nuisance of itself. The rebels would have to reduce the base, at the very least, and they’d certainly want to capture it.

But it would still take months before they could deem themselves ready for attack. The fleet was one problem, yet the orbital defences were just as badly decayed. Given time, they too could be fixed, but Wachter had made the decision to concentrate on the starships. If nothing else, he’d confided to Penny, they could fall back on Earth, destroying the base’s facilities as they left. The decision wouldn’t make him popular, but it would be the right one to take.

“We do need to delay them, if possible,” Wachter said. “Have you organised the ambush squadrons?”

“Yes, sir,” Penny said. “They’re ready to depart as soon as you

give the order."

She saw hesitation on Wachter's face and understood. They'd worked hard to train and retrain crewmen, but sending so many ships away from Morrison meant that they would effectively be on their own. What if there were mutineers among their ranks? Or what if some of the crew were planning to desert? It was a persistent problem, one that had only grown worse since the rebellion had begun. Not everyone had joined the Imperial Navy expecting to have to fight.

Idiots, she thought. But to anyone stationed at Morrison, she suspected, it would have seemed a safe bet. Until the rebellion had begun, of course.

"Remind their commanders that I don't want useless heroics," Wachter ordered. "We don't need to lose ships, no matter how gloriously. If the odds are too highly against success, Penny, I don't expect them to engage. Make that clear to everyone."

Penny nodded, although she had her doubts. The Imperial Navy was far too used to backseat driving from officers and bureaucrats back on Earth, even though it took *weeks* to get a message from Morrison to Earth and back again. An officer who hadn't been there might claim that the battle *could* have been won… and accuse the officer who had been there of cowardice. It often seemed better, she thought, to have the glorious disaster rather than living long enough to face the sceptics from Earth.

"And I want them to avoid atrocities," he added. "Any rebels taken into custody are to be treated under the standard Gulliver Protocols."

"Sir?"

"No atrocities," Wachter said. "Anyone involved in prisoner abuse will be shot. Make that clear to them too."

Penny swallowed. The Gulliver Protocols were so old that no one had bothered to even pay lip service to them in centuries. They dated all the way back to the days before the formation of the Empire, when there were dozens of smaller human political entities waging a constant battle for supremacy that had been ended by the First Interstellar War. The Imperial Navy had never honoured the protocols, not when fighting humans and certainly not when fighting aliens. She wasn't even sure she knew what they *said*.

She understood Wachter's logic. People would fight to the death if they thought there was no way out, no matter how hopeless the situation seemed. But the Thousand Families would want blood; worse, they would want to make horrific examples of every rebel they could catch, just to dissuade others from following in their footsteps. Wachter could lose his position over trying to treat captured rebels decently.

If it had been Percival, she would have watched gleefully as Percival was stripped of rank and status, then shipped to a mining colony safely out of the way. But Wachter wasn't Percival…

"Sir," she said, carefully, "there will be objections…"

"I was charged with winning the war," Wachter pointed out, smoothly. "Treating prisoners decently will certainly help win the war before the entire Empire comes apart."

"Yes, sir," Penny said. Percival would probably have slapped her by now, just for daring to raise objections. "Sir… this could cost you your position."

Wachter surprised her by laughing. "They could, if they wish," he said. "And if they tell me to go back home and stay there, I will do it. But as long as I am in command, I will not tolerate any atrocities carried out against helpless victims. We can offer the rebels transit to a penal world rather than simply executing them on sight."

"There are penal worlds to which death would seem preferable," Penny said. Percival had threatened her with one, once. He'd claimed that something in the atmosphere destroyed intelligence, leaving behind mindless animals where humans had once been. It had seemed amusing at the time, Penny remembered with a flicker of shame. Now… it was no longer funny. "Sir…"

"Don't worry about me, really," Wachter said. He finished his glass and placed it neatly on the table, then picked up a datapad and passed it to her. "I'd like you to take a look at this."

Penny tapped the screen, activating the pad. It lit up, showing her an essay entitled *False Gravimetric Pulses and Flicker Fields*. Penny considered herself something of an expert in working her way through long-winded intelligence reports, but the scientific terms in the report meant nothing to her. Irritated, she scrolled forward until she reached the summery and scowled. It didn't seem to be very practical at all.

"I wouldn't say that," Wachter observed, when she said that out loud. "Where did the rebels get their ships?"

"They mutinied," Penny said. "They stole the ships."

Wachter smiled. "And so we know their ships inside out," he said. "They're not new construction, they're ships we designed and built."

Penny didn't follow. It was possible that there was some override programmed into the superdreadnaughts that would allow the Imperial Navy to regain control… no, that wasn't likely to exist. The Geeks or Nerds would have taken advantage of such backdoors if they existed. Even command datanets could be deactivated manually if necessary.

"I don't understand," she confessed. Wachter's mind seemed to move in strange patterns, rather than anything she recognised. But then, her own mind had been badly damaged. "We can project an

illusionary gravity field… but what practical good does it serve?"

"One of the problems with the flicker drive is that the larger the ship, the further you have to be from a gravity well to use the drive safely," Wachter said, slipping into lecture mode. "So you can have gunboats and shuttles jumping into a planet's atmosphere, but superdreadnaughts have to be well away from the gravity well to make their own jumps. We are so paranoid about losing a superdreadnaught that we program safety interlocks into the drives to prevent them from activating when they are too close to a planetary mass."

Penny nodded. There was a story about an officer who had tried to jump a battlecruiser into a planetary atmosphere. No one knew what had happened after that, but he and his ship had never been seen again. The general conclusion was that the flicker field had snapped out of existence, scattering the ship's atoms across five light years.

She smiled as light dawned. "They won't be able to jump out," she said. "They'd be trapped."

"At least until they take out the safety interlocks," Wachter said. He shrugged. "By its very nature, the trick will only work once. As the gravity field isn't *real*, they might be able to jump out safely once the interlocks are removed."

"Clever," Penny said. She would never have considered the possibility — and neither would have Percival. *He* had only believed in brute force. It might have worked if he'd had the squadrons to apply it properly. "Why hasn't this been done before?"

"The basic idea was discussed hundreds of years ago, but it rather relied on intimate knowledge of what the enemy's technology was programmed to do," Wachter said. "How often did that happen during the wars?"

Penny shook her head. She would have been surprised if it had happened at all.

But it would work here, she was sure of it. Wachter was right. They *did* know what technology the rebels were using — and how best to disrupt it.

"I'm putting you in command of establishing the network of stations we'll need," Wachter said. "Draw whatever resources the engineers require, but don't let word get out to *anyone* of what we have in mind. The Geeks might figure it out if they see what we're doing."

He smiled at her. "And if it works," he added, "we could win the war in one fell swoop."

Chapter Fourteen

The darkness of interstellar space had always chilled Colin to the bone. There was nothing, but eternal darkness, broken only by pinpricks of light. If something went wrong with the flicker drive in interstellar space, it would be centuries before the fleet managed to limp into the closest star system — and by then the Empire would probably have regained control of the rebel-held territories. And yet, it was the ideal RV point for the rebels. There was no way the Imperial Navy would be able to locate them save through an impossible stroke of luck.

Colin stood in the observation blister, staring out at the stars. On this scale, even the massive superdreadnaught was tiny, utterly unnoticeable in the endless desert of interstellar space. He wanted to take the discussion to the conference room, but he refused to allow his groundless fears to get the better of him. Instead, he watched the stars — and listened as his subordinates spoke. There would be time for a formal meeting later, if necessary.

"We took out the defences of twelve worlds and hammered their ground-based facilities," Commodore Jeremy Damiani said. "Resistance was marginal, although one enemy destroyer did manage to ram one of our destroyers broadsides, taking both craft out."

Colin scowled. A destroyer was barely noticeable compared to the superdreadnaughts, but he felt each and every loss like a dagger in the heart. Besides, the rebels simply didn't have as many ships to play with as the Imperial Navy. *They* could afford to keep pouring smaller ships into rebel territories indefinitely, forcing him to hold back his own ships to counter the threat — or allowing them to run riot behind his lines. He was marginally surprised the Imperial Navy hadn't already started trying to raid his territories, although it was possible that they hadn't yet recovered from the shock of the first rebellion. It had only been three months since Earth had realised that the Thousand Families had a rebellion on their hands.

Unless they were warned earlier, Colin reminded himself, again. He pushed the thought aside, angrily. There was no point in worrying about something he couldn't change. *If Percival had been honest with them right from the start we might never have got out of Sector 117.*

"Good work," he said. "Are you ready to proceed into the next sector?"

"As soon as we reload our missile tubes and external racks," Damiani assured him. "The operation is underway now."

Colin nodded. The Imperial Navy rarely practiced reloading its starships in interstellar space, even though the fleet train had once

been the key to victory in the First Interstellar War. But then, the Imperial Navy had shipyards and repair bases everywhere and no prospect of a massive fleet deployment, not when there was no real threat to the Empire. Colin's forces didn't have that luxury. He'd forced them to practice deep-space reloading until they could do it in their sleep. They didn't dare risk setting up a shipyard anywhere the Empire could find it.

"The freighter crews have brought you everything you could want," Daria commented. "I think you have good reason to be proud of them."

"I am," Colin said. "Without their services, the offensive would have ground to a halt."

The Imperial Navy's officers tended to sneer at those assigned to operate the fleet train. They were seen as little better than merchantmen, officers and crew considered too unskilled to be allowed to serve on warships, yet not worth the effort of discharging from the navy. It wasn't surprising that morale in the fleet train was often very low, or that they often delayed reloading just long enough to embarrass the warship crews. Colin knew he couldn't allow himself that attitude, not now. Besides, the Imperial Navy's attitude had grown up over centuries of peace. Right now, the fleet train was a necessity.

"Make sure you tell them that," Daria said, tartly. "These aren't naval personnel, you know. No offense."

"None taken," Colin said. Independent spacers were often more prideful than military or corporate personnel. If they felt shunned, they were quite capable of simply resigning from the fleet train and going home. "I'll tour some of the ships once the reloading is complete, if that is acceptable."

"It will do," Daria conceded. She gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Are you still intending to advance on Tyson?"

"I don't think we have a choice," Colin said. "The base is in poor condition, according to the defectors, but given time they could turn it into a proper threat. And there are at least four squadrons of various starships stationed there. I'd prefer to destroy or capture them before we press onwards against Morrison."

"They might just cut the ships loose," Damiani pointed out. "We don't need more raiders in our rear."

"Or send them back to Morrison," Colin agreed. All of his projections indicated that the Empire would make a stand at Morrison. It was the best place to face the rebel fleet, if they could mass enough superdreadnaughts in place to give Colin a bloody nose. Besides, they'd know as well as Colin did that he had to obliterate Morrison before he could advance on Earth. "No, we have to go after them as

soon as possible."

He tapped a switch, bringing up the latest intelligence reports. Tyson wasn't an unusual military base, but there was a surprisingly large commercial presence too. Four orbital fortresses guarded a number of asteroid settlements, orbital industrial notes and a pair of small shipyards, as well as a heavily inhabited planet. And, unlike most of the other worlds Colin had occupied, it could be counted upon to remain loyal to the Empire.

There are five separate families involved, he thought, remembering how he'd worked his way through the intelligence summaries. *They're actually competing for manpower, so they can't squeeze the population too tightly.*

"Tyson will also require a heavier occupation force than any prior world," he stated. How *would* the locals react when the rebels arrived? Would they stay neutral, join up with the rebels or actually remain loyal to the Empire? There was no way to know. "But I don't want to secure the surface, beyond the planetary defence centres. We don't want a repeat of Jackson's Folly."

"No," Daria agreed. "Our reputation would not survive."

Colin nodded. Jackson's Folly hadn't been saved by the mutinies. Admiral Percival had deployed a second squadron of superdreadnaughts to bring the planet to heel, which they'd done in characteristically brutal fashion, destroying the local defence force with ease. And then they'd landed Blackshirts… and the insurgency had begun. By the time Colin had liberated Jackson's Folly for the second time, both sides had inflicted horrendous damage on each other. But the Empire had been winning the war.

They didn't really care about the Blackshirts, Colin reminded himself, sternly. *As far as they were concerned, they were expendable. There were plenty more where they came from. But we couldn't afford those losses, even if we didn't care about giving the Empire a propaganda victory. And we don't really have to try.*

He looked up at Damiani. "I want you to raid through the systems surrounding Tyson," he ordered. "Don't try to take and hold territory, just see if you can make enough of a nuisance of yourself that they send ships from Tyson to try and stop you. Anything that weakens the base's defences might come in handy. Broadcast our standard call to arms as you approach each system — there may be some rebels there, willing to join us."

"Understood," Damiani said. He looked up at the star chart, mentally calculating travel times. "It will be a week before we're in position to attack the first world."

"I'll move the main fleet to here," Colin said, tapping a point a bare two light years from Tyson. "That should give us time to gather

intelligence before we jump into the system itself. We can't count on them simply surrendering when they see us approach, not here. I'd be surprised if they weren't trying to rush reinforcements to Tyson already."

"We really do need that FTL communicator," Daria agreed. "It would be so much easier if our intelligence wasn't out of date by the time we received it."

Colin nodded. The only bonus was that the Imperial Navy would be in a worse state. By now, he was sure, Colin's original message to the Empire had reached every last corner of the towering edifice, calling the discontented and the oppressed to war. There was still a trickle of starships coming in to join the rebel forces, starships that had mutinied against their commanding officers. Sooner or later, Colin knew, that would stop. The Empire would station Marines on every ship, preventing future mutinies. But everyone would know that mutinies were now possible…

He scowled. The closer they got to Earth, the faster the Empire could react to their presence — and the longer it took to ship supplies from the Rim to the fleet. Thankfully, the Geeks had built up huge stockpiles, but Colin had already made capturing Imperial Navy supply dumps a priority. But the Imperial Navy had to know that too. Colin wouldn't be surprised to know that Tyson and Morrison had orders to destroy their supplies before falling into rebel hands.

If I'd been in their shoes, he thought, *I'd make sure such orders were issued — and obeyed*.

"And if wishes were fishes, we would all be splashing around in the sea," Colin said, ruefully. "We'll just have to make do with what we have."

"Yes, sir," Damiani said. "Speaking of which, I will return to my ships and supervise the reloading."

"Inform me when you are ready to depart," Colin ordered. "And good luck."

He watched Damiani withdraw, then turned to look at Daria. "How is morale holding up?"

"So far, so good," Daria said. "The real test will come when we face our first significant defeat."

Colin nodded. The Shadow Fleet had been mouse-trapped once before — it had been a relief to discover that Commodore Brent-Cochrane had been killed at Second Camelot — and he knew it was quite possible that it could happen again. Just because Admiral Percival hadn't been able to find his ass with both hands, a full sensor suite and someone screaming the instructions into his ear didn't mean that the other Imperial Navy officers were incompetent. Maybe their main qualification for high rank had been ass-kissing, but they might

be equally capable at kicking ass.

And which side would I be on, Colin asked himself, *if Percival had promoted me instead of seeing me as a threat*?

The thought reminded him that he hadn't seen the evils of the Empire, not really. He had officers and men under him who *had*, men and women who had seen the worst and sworn not to tolerate it any longer, but the younger Colin had been a prideful ass, more intent on winning promotion and reward for his talents than any moral or ethical concerns Would he have turned a blind eye, he asked himself, if Percival had given Colin the rewards he'd been promised? He'd been far too self-centred in those days. Hell, even the mutiny had been more about taking the rewards he'd earned than anything else.

He looked back at the star chart and shivered. Morrison, by his calculations, would provide the first major test of the expanded fleet. If they lost the battle, they might lose the war. And he had no illusions about what the Empire would do to the worlds Colin had liberated. Local leaders would be butchered, taxes would be raised higher and massive occupation forces would be shipped in to keep the populations firmly under control. They would never have a hope of freedom again.

Or the Empire itself might collapse. Colin saw it all, in his mind's eye. The economy would go, taking with it the strands that bound the Empire together. Entire star systems would be impoverished, military commanders would become warlords, Earth and hundreds of other worlds would starve… and the whole human race would fall into an endless night. It wasn't enough to destroy the Empire, he reminded himself. He had to replace it with something better, something reformed enough to give everyone a stake in the system.

Daria coughed. Colin jumped. He'd almost forgotten she was there.

"So," she said. "Credit for your thoughts?"

"I was just contemplating the future," Colin admitted. "What we'll do when we win."

"Better catch your chicken before you cook and eat it," Daria advised, dryly. "The future will come when it comes. Right now, your priority is to win."

"True," Colin agreed. "Very true."

He held out a hand to her. "Shall we go visit the freighter crews?"

"Why, I thought you'd never ask," Daria said, twisting her voice into a mocking aristocratic accent. "Let us go see those whose hard work keeps the fleet going."

* * *

The spy had known that the rebels were organised, but she hadn't really realised *how* organised until she'd spent a month on the rebel superdreadnaught. Unlike the Imperial Navy, where junior crewmen were often left at the mercy of NCOs and bullying rings, the rebels seemed determined to involve everyone in their work. The Senior Chiefs were strong and capable men, all skilled at drawing the very best out of their subordinates, while the officers took a keen interest in what the crewmen did. Indeed, quite a few of the officers were mustangs, crewmen who had been promoted to the ranks. The practice was rare in the Imperial Navy, but the rebels had adopted it with glee.

It seemed to be working out for them, the spy had to concede. Newly-minted officers might know how to salute, wear dress uniform and precisely just how much they should genuflect to higher-ranking officers, but they didn't often know much about the practicalities of their job or just how closely they should be supervising their subordinates. They tended to leave such matters in the hands of the Senior Chiefs or NCOs, all the while concentrating on how best to take the credit while avoiding blame. But mustangs knew their compartment intimately, inside and out, and they were rarely scared of tough crewmen who might intimidate younger, more vulnerable crewmen. Overall, the efficiency rate had improved remarkably.

The spy found that galling — and not a little worrying. Being on the superdreadnaught was nothing like being on the asteroid, where it was a dog-ate-dog world at the best of times. She had been conditioned as part of her training, disloyalty to the Empire could only remain as an abstract concept in her mind. It wasn't fair, she told herself, more than once; if she'd been able to switch sides, she might have tried. There were worse causes to die for than reforming the Empire. Hell, merely improving the promotion system alone might help staunch the bleeding.

But she *had* been conditioned and, sooner or later, her programming would push her into taking action, even at the risk of her own life.

It was astonishing, she had discovered, just how much information was openly shared between the decks. On an Imperial Navy starship, the crew were often kept ignorant of what was going on around them, but the rebels didn't seem to care who knew where they were going. The spy found it unbelievable at first, right up until the information was proved accurate. Didn't they realise they had a security problem… or didn't they *care*? The spy had no illusions about the former. The Imperial Navy had attacked Sanctuary Asteroid and the only way they could have located the asteroid was through someone passing on the coordinates to Imperial Intelligence. Paranoia

had kept the spy passive, despite the growing pressure from her conditioning. What if they were merely watching and waiting for her to betray herself before they acted?

But eventually the conditioning wore her down.

There was no such thing as a master override code for a superdreadnaught command core. If there had been, the spy knew, the Geeks would have taken advantage of it long ago. Everyone knew that the Geeks had unhealthy relationships with computers, even going so far as to directly link their brains to computer cores and dump information directly into their heads. If there had been a master code, the entire Imperial Navy could simply have been deactivated.

But there were a handful of backdoors, for someone who knew the right codes and how to use them.

The spy had been nervous as soon as she entered the access code, once she found a place to work where she could be certain of being undiscovered. It was impossible to remove the backdoors, she had been assured, without disintegrating the entire computer core and rebuilding it from scratch, but someone could easily have inserted a flag into the system to sound the alert when the backdoor was used. She braced herself, yet nothing happened. But if they were still waiting…

Carefully, she inserted a string of commands into the system, then shut down the backdoor and made her way out of the component. No armed Marines were waiting to grab her, no officers staring her in disapproval… she seemed to have managed to insert the commands and then pull out without detection. She was still sweating, however, when she reached the mess and picked up a tray of food. If she'd been detected, she knew there would be no hope of escape.

"You should have tasted the food before we rose up," a voice said. She looked up to see a junior crewman, one of the old sweats. "It tasted like something someone scraped out of the back end of a cow."

The spy smiled. "Horrible," she said. Imperial Navy rations had never been very good at the best of times — and some senior officers had actually sold off the naval rations and replaced them with commercial crap, allowing them to pocket the difference. "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

They were still deep in conversation when the superdreadnaught — and its fleet — resumed its journey towards Tyson.

Chapter Fifteen

Admiral Ravi Lanai knew that she was not a great leader.

It wasn't something that bothered her, normally. She'd been an administrator for far longer than she'd been a starship officer, let alone a commander. Her patronage links had helped her to reach Tyson, where she'd found herself beholden to five different families rather than just one. It gave her an unusual freedom of action, but it also forced her to try to keep the balance between the families.

Tyson wasn't actually a bad place to live or work. The system hadn't originally been considered for a naval base — the files stated that Tyson was the only system in the sector that could reasonably serve as base, but Ravi suspected that someone had paid huge bribes to get the bureaucrats to agree — and much of the population was civilian. The combination of civilian presence and multiple aristocratic families created an odd dynamic, one that gave more freedom to the inhabitants than they could expect anywhere else. And Ravi, the CO of the system's defences, rather enjoyed it. She didn't have to bow and scrape to enjoy her position and the authority that came with it.

But the rebellion had upended all of her plans. If someone drew a line between Earth and Camelot, Tyson would be on that line — or at least close enough to make reducing the base a rebel priority. Ravi had watched in dismay as hundreds of senior administrators bugged out, taking their servants and slaves with them, while leaving her with orders to hold the planet as long as possible. *They* had clearly lacked any faith in her ability to hold the line. Not that Ravi could really blame them, to be fair. It had been decades since she had set foot on the command deck of a starship.

She'd half-expected the blow to fall instantly, even though cold logic told her that it was unlikely. Three months had passed since the Battle of Camelot, giving her time to prepare — although she was grimly aware that, lacking any superdreadnaught element, she could only bleed the rebels as they attacked the system. She'd also deployed a handful of smaller ships in nearby systems, some of which had reported the rebels flickering in, devastating the defences and then flickering out again. For once, Ravi was actually grateful that the administrators had recalled urgent business on the other side of the Empire. If they'd been on Tyson, watching as nearby investments were blown into fragments, they would have pestered her to send ships to defend them. But against the sheer weight of rebel firepower, it would be suicidal…

Unlike some officers she could mention, she had never seen the urge to fill her quarters with servants and pleasure slaves. Sleeping

alone was one of her great pleasures and she wanted to enjoy it, even if she knew the rebels were steadily advancing towards her position. She was tucked up in bed, half-asleep, when the alarm sounded, followed by the voice of her XO calling her to the command centre. Ravi snapped awake, silently thankful for her habit of sleeping in her underwear, then grabbed her trousers and jacket and pulled them on. She would look dishevelled, she knew, but it hardly mattered. She'd met too many officers who focused on spit and polish at the expense of fighting. No doubt one of them would have sniffed at her looks, if he had been on the command deck.

She stepped through the hatch and onto the command deck, ignoring the Marine's salute as she stared at the display. A handful of red icons had appeared, several million kilometres from the outer edge of engagement range. She didn't need more than a moment to identify the ships as rebel, even though they were Imperial Navy designs. The drive fields were very definitely ships that were known to have fallen into rebel hands.

"Admiral," her XO said. "I've sounded battlestations; the entire defence network is coming online…"

"Good," Ravi said, when he had finished. At least the rebels were giving them time to prepare, although it was odd. Did they think they could bluff her into surrendering? Some of the reports from her spy ships had suggested just that, although none of the other targeted systems had been so heavily defended. "Launch one courier boat to Morrison, then send two more out under stealth. I want them to have a full report of what happens next."

"Understood, Admiral," the XO said. "I'll see to it at once."

Ravi settled back in her command chair as the rebels altered course, slowly manoeuvring towards the planet. It was odd; they could have moved quicker, particularly if they wanted to catch her on the hoof. Or were they confident that they could still take the defences, even though she had plenty of time to prepare? Or did they have a secret weapon up their sleeves?

Her lips quirked. Used properly, the arsenal ships could inflict terrifying damage on her defences… and *they* were no secret, not any longer.

"I'm picking up a message, Admiral," the communications officer said. "They're beaming it all over the system."

"Let's hear it," Ravi said.

The communications officer tapped a switch. "…Is Admiral Walker of the Shadow Fleet, representing the Popular Front. You are outnumbered and outgunned. Surrender your installations now and we pledge that no harm will come to you. Those of you who wish to return to the Empire will be permitted to do so, those of you who wish

to remain neutral will be shipped to a comfortable holding camp where you can wait out the conflict. Any of you who wish to join us will be welcome. You have thirty minutes to decide."

Ravi's eyes narrowed. Thirty minutes was uncommonly generous, all the more so as she would have ample time to prepare for war. Her starships were already forming up near the fortresses, linking their point defence systems into the far wider network of automated platforms she'd rushed into deployment. If they did choose to throw a missile swarm at her, she was confident she could weaken it long before the missiles slammed into their targets.

"No reply," she ordered, as the enemy fleet slowed to a halt, relative to Tyson itself. "Keep deploying ECM drones and other countermeasures."

* * *

Colin wasn't looking forward to coming to grips with Tyson's defences. They were tougher than pre-war data had suggested, while the enemy CO had scattered countless automated platforms in orbit around the planet. If it wasn't for the shipyard and industrial nodes — and the starships, of course — he would have simply bypassed the planet altogether. Instead, he had to destroy its ability to impede his operations.

Devious bastard, he thought, wondering just who was in command of the defences. The intelligence probes hadn't been able to answer *that* question. *We can't leave you alone and you can gnaw us properly while we're smashing you into rubble*.

"No response, sir," the communications officer said.

Colin scowled. Most of the defenders who had surrendered without firing a shot had *known* they were badly outgunned — and that their superiors had abandoned them. Whoever was in charge of Tyson was clearly made of different mettle. He or she had had the wit to organise a defence, using all the resources built up in the system. Colin had no doubt that his forces could destroy the defences, followed rapidly by the industrial nodes if they couldn't be taken intact, but it would be costly.

"Repeat the message," he ordered. "And then we'll let them have their thirty minutes."

It was possible, he told himself, that there were mutineers on the stations, just waiting for a chance to take control. But somehow he doubted it. The enemy CO wouldn't have overlooked such an obvious possibility, even though Tyson was hardly a hardship posting. There would be Marines on the stations, holding them against all comers.

No, he couldn't count on anything, but brute force.

He watched the timer ticking down to zero as his fleet settled into formation. It *did* give the sensor staff time to locate every last automated platform, he decided, but there were few other advantages. If he couldn't intimidate the enemy commander into surrendering…

"The timer has reached zero, sir," the tactical officer said.

Colin gave him a sharp look, then nodded. "Take us forward," he ordered. They'd planned the attack out time and time again, yet no battle plan ever survived contact with the enemy. He would just have to hope that he was the equal of whoever was in command on the other side. "And prepare to open fire as soon as we reach missile range."

There was one great advantage to attacking fortresses, he reminded himself as the fleet started to inch forwards, locking weapons on targets. They couldn't run and they couldn't hide. And, by keeping the starships down in the gravity shadow, the enemy commander had ensured that *they* couldn't run either. If nothing else, the first barrage would inflict considerable damage on defenders who couldn't really fire back without knowing Colin's fleet could evade their missiles.

"Entering missile range, sir," the tactical officer said. "Missiles locked, ready to fire; defence grid armed, ready to fire."

"Fire," Colin ordered.

General Montgomery shuddered as she unleashed her external racks, followed rapidly by her missile tubes. Thousands of missiles blazed out into space, followed rapidly by missiles from the other superdreadnaughts and the arsenal ships. It was a colossal sledgehammer, almost irresistible… and the enemy defenders would have plenty of time to see it coming. They just wouldn't be able to do anything about it, Colin hoped. But they'd also had plenty of warning about the arsenal ships.

He kept one eye on the live feed from the missiles as the enemy fortresses began to fire back, expending their own external racks. The Geeks had vastly improved the seeker heads used by the missiles, ensuring that their accuracy was better and they could even select a new target if their first one was destroyed before they struck home. They hadn't yet solved the problem of extending powered flight, but Salgak had promised that it would be solved, sooner or later. Now they had access to the vast resources the Roosevelt Family had moved to Sector 117, the Geeks had grand plans for the future.

Assuming they survive, Colin thought, coldly. There was something odd about the enemy missiles, something that nagged at his mind. It struck him a moment later; they'd emptied their external racks, but they hadn't fired their missile tubes. Why? They'd know better than to

withhold the external racks — a single direct hit could wipe out the missiles before they were even fired — yet they should have fired their inner tubes too. It made no sense.

* * *

Ravi had to fight down an urge to panic as she saw the sheer weight of missiles powering their way towards her fortresses. There were so many missiles that even the most advantaged tactical sensors in the Empire had real problems separating one from another, something that would make it harder to target her point defence on specific missiles. But she did have her planned countermeasure, as well as her enhanced point defence. It probably wouldn't work twice, she told herself, but it would give her a fighting chance.

"Fire the external racks," she ordered, quietly.

She felt a moment of pride in her crew as they responded, despite the wall of death advancing towards them. No one had seen such a missile swarm outside a particularly sadistic training simulation, not until the rebels had started deploying their arsenal ships. It was a pitifully simple concept, in hindsight, one the Empire could duplicate within weeks… if it had seen any need to do so. Ravi rather suspected that the limitations of the design would eventually bring it down, or at least force it to be replaced by a more specialised starship, but for the moment it gave the rebels an advantage.

But it wasn't a decisive advantage…

She bit her lip as her missiles advanced towards the enemy swarm. The odds of a collision were low, although it *had* been known to happen when there were hundreds of thousands of missiles in the same general area of space. But now…

"Missiles spreading out," the tactical officer reported. "Twenty seconds to optimal detonation range."

"Detonate the missiles at the best moment," Ravi ordered. She wished, absurdly, that she was religious. It would have been nice to know that God was on her side. "Don't wait for orders, just do it."

The missiles closed — and her missiles began to detonate. She'd actually redesigned the standard nuclear warheads; instead of laser heads or focused detonations, designed to break down shields, the warheads were intended to create as wide a blast as possible. It would have been useless — worse than useless — against a starship's shields, but missiles had *no* shields.

"All missiles detonated," the tactical officer reported. "We blew holes in their formation."

Ravi smiled. "Warn the point defence crews to stand by," she

ordered. “There’s still thousands of missiles out there.”

* * *

“Sir, they took out a third of the missiles!”

“I see,” Colin said. “Launch a second barrage, but reprogram the missiles to stay further away from each other.”

He felt a glimmer of respect for the enemy commander. Who in their right mind would have constructed missiles that were useless against shields? Whoever was on the other side was smart enough to see the possibilities and high-ranking enough to push her idea through, even against opposition. And there *would* have been opposition. After all, the Imperial Navy wouldn’t be keen on innovation in the middle of wartime. They’d have to get over that attitude if they wanted to win.

“Aye, sir,” the tactical officer said. There was a pause, then the entire ship shuddered again. “Missiles away.”

Colin nodded, then settled back in his command chair. The only thing they could do now was press the enemy as hard as they could — and hope they killed the enemy commander. He disliked the thought of targeting someone personally because they were a devious bastard, but there was no choice. Superior firepower combined with superior tactical skill would give the enemy a dangerous advantage.

Pity you’re not on our side, he thought, addressing the holographic image of the enemy defences. *I would love to have someone like you with us*.

* * *

Ravi watched, as dispassionately as she could, as the remaining enemy missiles charged into the teeth of her point defence fire. Someone had been thinking on the other side too, she noted, as the missiles retargeted themselves in flight, falling on the starships that mounted additional point defence. Normally, the missiles were programmed to go after superdreadnaughts and orbital fortresses first, leaving the smaller ships and platforms untouched. This time, the missiles were stripping the point defence from her units first, before turning on the bigger facilities. Given the sheer size of enemy throw weights, she had to admit that it was a good tactic.

One by one, her starship icons flared red and disappeared. None of them were designed to stand up to such firepower. Even a superdreadnaught would have been overwhelmed and destroyed. The

automated platforms were also taking a beating, but she wasn't so worried about that. They were expendable, easy to replace — and every missile they soaked up was one that wouldn't go after a manned starship or defence unit.

"Incoming missiles," the tactical officer said, quietly. The station went to full alert, switching its point defence weapons back to self-defence. Ravi made a mental note to alter the programming, if they survived long enough to make the changes. Protecting smaller ships went against the grain, but it might be necessary if the rebels kept building arsenal ships. "Twenty seconds to impact."

"All hands brace for impact," the XO snapped. Alarms howled, warning the crew to grab hold of something before the missiles struck home. Even if the shields remained intact, the shockwaves would shake the entire station. "I say again, all hands…"

The station rocked violently as the missiles slammed against its shields. Ravi noted, forcing her mind to remain focused, that the rebels had either managed to increase the warhead yields or concentrate them into smaller and smaller shield components. Red lights flashed up on the status display, warning her that several shield generators had burned out, creating a gap in the shields. Moments later, the station rocked again as a missile made it through the gap and slammed right into the hull.

"Major damage to sectors Theta-Rho-343," the systems officer reported. Somehow, he managed to remain calm, even though the destruction could easily prove lethal. The fortress could soak up a great deal of damage, but there were limits. "Damage control parties are on their way."

"Swing the shield generators around," the XO ordered, his voice urgent and harsh. "Get that gap sealed before more missiles get through the defences!"

Ravi gritted her teeth as the second enemy missile barrage advanced towards the remains of her point defence network. They'd blunted the enemy attack, she knew, or they would have been annihilated by the first missile swarm. And yet it hadn't been enough.

She considered, briefly, surrendering her command. She'd fought — no one could deny she'd fought — and she'd certainly embarrassed the enemy. But it wasn't enough. She couldn't surrender if the enemy hadn't taken any damage, apart from to their pride. There were Imperial Navy officers who would have regarded that as a fatal wound, but the rebels were probably made of sterner stuff.

"General signal," she ordered. "All stations are to target the enemy ships and go to rapid fire."

She smiled to herself as the fortresses started to open fire in earnest. This time, at least, the rebels would know that they had been

kissed. And if they wanted to jump away, she would have time to rebuild her defences.

All right, you bastard, she thought, feeling an odd burst of self-satisfaction. *What else do you have up your sleeve*?

Chapter Sixteen

"Sir," the tactical officer said, "the fortresses have gone to rapid fire."

Colin nodded, unsurprised. Whoever was in command of the defences wasn't going to give up easily — and, without the arsenal ships, the odds were actually fairly even. Colin could disengage at any point, of course, but that would have left a determined enemy commander sitting on one victory and ready to support the Imperial Navy when it returned to the sector.

"Continue firing," he ordered. So far, the fortresses had been damaged — but none of them had actually been destroyed completely. "Lock all weapons on the fortresses. Leave the remaining automated systems alone."

He hesitated, then added a second command. "And repeat our surrender offer," he added. "Someone might realise that they cannot hope to win the fight."

* * *

The spy had been kept busy as soon as the fleet flickered away from the RV point, which was useful as it stopped her worrying about the command she'd inserted into the computer. But now, waiting for the superdreadnaught to be damaged so the damage control teams could spring into action, she found it all too easy to worry. It would be hard for someone to notice anything amiss in the heat of battle, but who knew what might be noticed when rebel analysts looked at the recordings after the battle. They would certainly want to analyse what had happened, if only to draw what lessons they could from the fighting.

She started as a hand touched her shoulder. "Don't worry about it," Crewman Nix told her. He was a fresh-faced young man, a imp mutineer rather than someone who'd joined up after the rebels had captured Camelot. And the spy knew he wanted to get her into bed. The signs were unmistakable. "If the ship is too badly damaged, the Captain will just jump us out."

The spy nodded, reluctantly. It *was* her first battle, both in actual fact and by the papers she'd presented when she'd signed up. Not that the rebels had been very formal, thankfully; they certainly hadn't tried to conduct any sort of background check. But then, that would have been impossible in the Beyond. All they could reasonably do was speak to people who had known her as an engineer, none of whom

had any reason to suspect her of anything beyond price-gouging.

She eyed Nix as he turned away to reassure others. If she took him to bed — or, rather, allowed him to take *her* to bed — would it gain her anything she wanted? Nix might be enthusiastic, but he hadn't been promoted. And that suggested he really wasn't likely to be promoted. She knew she could seduce him — and leave him thinking that he'd seduced her — but would it be worth the effort?

The thought kept her from thinking about the command network. Now, with the ship heavily involved in battle, a signal would be sent from the superdreadnaught to any Imperial Intelligence listening post that happened to be in the system. Tyson was an important system, the spy knew, even if it wasn't anything like as important as Morrison. There would be a listening post, she was sure, and the message would be passed on to the local office. She knew the rough time the rebel fleet intended to arrive at Morrison…

And, if she was lucky, there would be a chance to pass more precise messages to her superiors later.

The superdreadnaught rocked, violently. Alarms sounded, only to be stilled a moment later as the sensors realised that there was no actual damage. But it was only a matter of time.

* * *

"*Admiral Nelson* is taking heavy fire," the tactical officer reported. "They're actually focusing their attention on her."

Colin lifted an eyebrow. Could the enemy think that they'd located the command ship?

"Move her back, then alter the screen's positioning to provide additional cover," Colin ordered, dismissing the thought for later contemplation. They'd taken every precaution to prevent the enemy from identifying the command ship — and they seemed to have succeeded, given that the enemy had targeted the wrong ship. Or had they merely picked a superdreadnaught at random?

He settled back and watched as the two sides converged. It would all be over soon.

* * *

Ravi swore under her breath as she watched another flight of missiles fall to rebel point defence fire. The bastards had definitely improved, even though her sensors insisted that there were no significant improvements to *their* active sensors. But that didn't prove

anything. Missiles were easy to track in flight, even half-blind passive sensors would be able to track them and provide a targeting lock for point defence. And her own point defence was being worn down quite badly…

The station rocked violently as four more missiles slammed against the weakened shields. Two more shield generators burned out, forcing the crews to move the others to shield the entire hull. But the weakening shields would be easy to detect; scenting weakness, the rebel missiles altered course, bearing down on her fortress and slamming into her shields. New alarms sounded as the shields staggered under their blows, then failed completely. The remainder of the defences weren't in much better state.

Ravi looked up at the display, then made up her mind. "Cease fire," she ordered. "Order the starships to make their way out of the gravity well and flicker out, then raise the rebels and tell them we want to surrender."

It was frighteningly easy to imagine that the rebels would be no longer willing to accept surrender. Two enemy superdreadnaughts had been badly hit, while several smaller craft had been destroyed outright. She'd lost more, naturally, but she'd still given them a bloody nose. And there were too many Imperial Navy commanders who would have gleefully destroyed her stations just to avenge his hurt pride…

"They're holding fire," the tactical officer said.

"Picking up a signal," the communications officer added.

Ravi let out a long breath. "Put them though," she ordered.

A grim-faced young man appeared on the screen. Ravi couldn't help noticing that Colin Walker seemed to have aged, although his blue eyes were as cold as they had seemed in his official file. He wore a white uniform that seemed oddly familiar; it took her several moments to realise that it *was* an Imperial Navy uniform, just cut from white cloth instead of blue or black. A gesture of defiance or continuity, she asked herself. There was no way to know.

"I am Admiral Walker," he said. Ravi fought down the urge to point out that self-promotion was no promotion. If nothing else, Walker had won his spurs in combat. "Do I understand that you wish to surrender?"

Ravi nodded, hoping that they would be offered the original terms.

"My Marines will board your fortresses," Walker informed her. "You and your crews are ordered to unlock any security protocols, then refrain from wiping your computer cores and destroying your supplies. Any attempt to do so — or to offer armed resistance to my men — will be viewed as restarting hostilities. Do you understand

me?"

I still gave you a bloody nose, you prick, Ravi thought.

She felt a cold wave of anger, which she fought down. The supplies stored in orbit around Tyson would keep the rebels going for several weeks, if they were allowed to take them intact. She could destroy them — charges were already rigged — but they'd slaughter her crews if she did. And yet… leaving them intact might cost the Imperial Navy the next battle, when the rebels turned them against the Empire.

But she had no choice.

"I do," she said, aloud. The rebels would have to take the supplies from the orbital supply dumps, but that wouldn't delay them for more than a few days at most. "What will happen to my officers and men?"

"They will be interned or returned to the Empire," Walker said. "If any of them wish to join us, they may do so. Again, however, we cannot tolerate resistance while we board your faculties."

He paused. "Speaking of which, are you surrendering the planet as well?"

"I believe the planet will surrender shortly," Ravi said. Tyson was well-defended, but an exchange of fire with the rebel fleet would be absolutely disastrous. It was why most PDCs and naval facilities were built on uninhabited worlds. "If you wish, I will ask them to do so, although they are not under my direct command."

"I understand," Walker said. "For the moment, I suggest you prepare to receive boarders."

* * *

"It's bigger than the last one," Sidney commented, as the shuttle approached the giant orbital fortress. "Much bigger."

The fortress was larger than anything he had ever imagined, apart from an asteroid settlement — and those were really hollow asteroids, not something built from scratch. It's colossal hull was pitted and scarred, large gashes torn into the structure that revealed decks and machines beyond his comprehension. The shuttle suddenly felt very small against the fortress; the suit's systems, linked into the shuttle's sensors, reported that there were bodies drifting through space, blown out of the structure by escaping air. Faint lights glittered inside the darkness, some of them reminding him of the moment the Imperial Marines had attacked the asteroid.

"Same rules as before," the Sergeant snapped. "But remember, this place is *not* safe. We can't secure anyone until we make sure the atmosphere will stay in the remainder of the hulk, no matter how

paranoid we feel. Watch your backs, confiscate all weapons… and try to avoid using lethal force. Do you understand me?"

"But these are imps," someone protested, from the rear of the shuttle. "They attacked us and…"

"You will treat them with respect because you have been ordered to do so," the Sergeant growled. "If I have to remonstrate with any of you over prisoner mistreatment, you will regret it for the rest of a very short and miserable life. I don't care what you think these poor bastards have done to you. You will be calm, professional and respectful, as long as they behave themselves. If they don't, you can give them hell."

The shuttle rocked as it slipped into the hulk and settled down on the torn deck. Sidney checked his mask, then followed the Sergeant out into the giant fortress. The entire compartment looked badly mangled, torn and melted metal everywhere. He was silently grateful that he couldn't see any bodies. If a nuke had gone off inside the structure, he realised, as the Sergeant led them towards the closest active airlock, the metal would have survived, but the crew would have been utterly vaporised. He was surprised that the gravity generator was still functional.

"It's probably helping to hold the fortress together," the Sergeant grunted, when he said that out loud. "These structures are tough, but not that tough."

Sidney nodded, remembering what he'd been told about internal compensators. Sometimes they had difficulty compensating for sudden shifts, which was why starships shuddered when they were struck by missiles. But if the compensators failed altogether, the crew would be smashed to paste before they had the slightest idea what of what was about to hit them. The airlock was sealed, he realised, as they stopped in front of it. After a moment of fiddling, they managed to open the hatch and step through, three at a time.

Inside, the sensors blinked up alerts at once. The station was definitely badly damaged; the air was starting to foul alarmingly quickly. Life support was usually the last thing to go, even given the Empire's dismal maintenance record. But the system probably wasn't designed to stand up to such a heavy battering.

He gripped his rifle tightly as he saw the first Imperial Navy crewmen. The officers and men he'd encountered on the last station had been relieved, to some extent, that their war was over and done with. Once they'd realised that they weren't going to be shot on the spot, their relief had almost been palatable. Sidney had been torn between irritation that they were going to get away with being enemy officers and relief himself, relief that they hadn't tried to fight.

But this group were different. There was clear resentment in their

eyes, suggesting that they'd actually liked and admired their commanding officer. None of them were carrying weapons, as far as Sidney was able to tell, but the hatred in their eyes worried him. It might lead them to do something stupid.

And we're not even allowed to bind their hands, he thought, sourly. *They could try to jump us the moment we turn our backs*.

He spoke through the suit's voder. "Please remain calm, then wait for collection," he ordered, finally. "You will be taken off the station as soon as possible."

* * *

"We may have to transfer the crewmen to the planet's surface," the communications officer said. "There's a *lot* of them."

Colin nodded, sourly. Fortresses tended to take thousands of crewmen, even if they were simpler than starships. But it was just another logistics problem, one made easier by having captured the shuttles on the surface. Unless, of course, the crewmen could be convinced to join the rebellion… and yet, that seemed unlikely. They'd been treated well, competently led and they'd given the rebels a beating even if they'd lost. In many ways, they were as good as the forces he led.

Lucky they didn't have superdreadnaughts, he thought. *We might have come out worse*.

He smiled. "Has there been any reply from the planet?"

"The planetary council is demanding guarantees for the safety of their property and investments," the communications officer said. "What would you like me to tell them?"

Colin snorted. At a guess, the planetary council thought that it could keep its position, even the investments from the Thousand Families, despite losing to the rebels. It was clever of them to try, he had to admit, but it wasn't going to get them anywhere. The planet's inhabitants could sort out who got what afterwards.

"Tell them that we will guarantee their own personal safety, but nothing else," he said. "And if they don't surrender the planet, we will take it by force."

There was a pause. "They would like to report the existence of supplies on the surface," the communications officer said. "If we protect them, they will tell us where to find the supplies."

"Tell them that Marines will be on the way as soon as they are cleared to fly through their airspace without being shot at," he ordered. "But make it clear that I want that acknowledged before we provide any protection."

He gritted his teeth. The planetary defenders should know that they were in a hopeless position, but if they had no real experience or training they might figure they could still stand off the rebel fleet. If worst came to worst, Colin would blast the planetary defences from orbit, then mine the high orbitals, isolating the planet from the Empire.

"Admiral," the sensor officer said, suddenly. "We just picked up two departing flicker signatures."

Colin looked over at the display. From the size, he guessed they were courier boats — probably heading back towards Morrison. They'd be pushing the speed limits all the way.

"Have the enemy CO brought to this ship so we can ask her," he ordered. It was possible that there was an enemy fleet within striking range, although if that was the case they'd missed their best shot at a decisive victory. "Then alter the fleet's formation — Tango-Charlie, I think."

The communications officer looked up. "The planetary government has surrendered," he said. "They've confirmed that the Marines are granted passage through their airspace."

There was a pause. "I think they actually want the Marines to *hurry*," he added. "I'm picking up some chatter about mob riots and crowds gathering in uncomfortable places."

Colin sighed. "Dispatch the Marines," he ordered. "Tell them to safeguard the planetary council, either by securing their property or providing emergency evacuation., whatever seems best to the officer on the ground. And keep me informed."

He sat back in his command chair, watching as the fleet slipped into its new formation. It had been a close-run thing, closer than he cared to admit. If the enemy CO had had more starships or superdreadnaughts under her command, Colin's forces could have been seriously hurt. As it was, he would need to spend a few days repairing the damaged *Admiral Nelson* before they could resume the advance. The imps had definitely won some time, even if they'd won nothing else.

There was a chime. "Sir, the officers and crewmen from the fortresses have been evacuated onto the holding freighters," the communications officer said. "The Marines are being redeployed to assist the advance teams on the ground."

Colin allowed himself a moment of relief. There had been several near-incidents on the fortresses — and they could easily have turned into bloodbaths. He knew the enemy would have taken the brunt of it, but he still didn't like the thought. A shooting could easily become an unprovoked massacre once Public Information got their hands on it. He rolled his eyes a moment later. They'd probably already started

making up stories out of whole cloth.

"Admiral, the Marines escorting Admiral Lanai are returning to the ship," the communications officer said. "How do you wish her to be treated?"

"Decently," Colin said. He didn't know Admiral Lanai. That could be good or very bad. "Find her a secure cabin, assign her a pair of Marines as guards. Make sure they know she is to be protected, unless she does something stupid. I'll speak to her as soon as I can."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer said.

Colin settled back in his chair and tried to project an air of calm. The Marines were heading down to the planet now… and half of them were barely worthy of the title. It was all too easy to imagine what could go wrong…

Chapter Seventeen

"This is a planet," Howell said, as the shuttle plunged into the atmosphere. "It is surrounded by atmosphere…"

"Shut up," Sidney snapped. He was used to asteroid settlements and starships, not fragile planets. It was hard for him to even imagine who would *want* to live on a planet. They were untamed, even the ones that had been extensively terraformed for human habitation, and limited. One could build anything in space, but not on the surface of a planet. "I don't want to think about it."

"Oh?" Howell jeered. "Is the big bad Marine scared of a planet?"

The shuttle rocked. Sidney glared at Howell, then concentrated on not throwing up in the confined space. Travel in space was normally smooth, but flying through a planet's atmosphere was rough and dangerous. He hadn't felt naked and helpless when he was making his way through enemy-held territory, not even when the imps had attacked Sanctuary Asteroid, yet he felt helpless now. But then, all the training in the universe wouldn't help if the shuttle fell out of the sky.

He accessed the live feed from the shuttle's sensors in the hope it would make him feel better, but it just sent shivers down his spine. The planet's capital city was spread out on both sides of a massive river, which was flowing down towards the giant ocean. There was nothing like it in space, not even the asteroids designed and built for people who had engineered fish-like gills into their bodies. He saw boats making their way over the water, heading towards the city. It was easy to wonder, he decided, just how limited the locals felt. In space, there was always room to expand — or go elsewhere, if one didn't like the neighbours.

"All right, listen up," the Sergeant barked. "The people of this planet may not be pleased to see us. They will fear us, they will resent us, they may worry what we might bring down on their heads. You are to treat them with respect and courtesy — and you are not to resort to force unless there is no other choice. Anyone who defies me on this will regret it."

He lowered his voice. "For most of you, this is your first time among the civilians," he added. "Civilians can do damn stupid things. They will make threatening sounds, they will make rude gestures, they will delight in trying to make your job harder. Some of them won't believe that we can hurt them, others will be too damn stupid to care. Remain calm, remain in control and use lethal force only as a last resort."

The shuttle shuddered, then dropped down towards the city. Sidney had a glimpse of large stone buildings before the link dropped

out, a second before the shuttle hit the ground. A dull thump ran through the craft; planetary gravity caught at him a moment later, tugging him downwards even as he stood up and jogged towards the hatch. Tyson had a slightly higher gravity than standard, he noted absently. Not enough to cause problems, but enough to be noticeable. But they'd trained under much worse conditions.

"Spread out," the Sergeant snapped. "1st Platoon, remain with the shuttles; the rest of you, follow me."

The planet was *big*, Sidney realised, as he stared around in astonishment. No asteroid settlement was so… unbounded. There were certainly no towering stone buildings in asteroids, at least none of the ones he had ever seen. The buildings themselves were protected by stone walls, although one glance told him that people could easily start climbing over the defences and breaking into the compound at any moment. A glance at his HUD revealed that crowds were already gathering on the far side of the wall.

He followed the Sergeant up to the building, where several wealthy-looking men were gathered outside, waiting for the Marines. There was a brief moment of conversation between the Sergeant and the welcoming committee, followed by orders for the Marines to secure the perimeter. Sidney pushed aside the air of unreality that threatened to overwhelm him and led his detachment down to the gate. Outside, the crowd was growing bigger and nastier by the second. The civilians, judging by their clothing, came from all walks of life. But they were bound together by a desire to riot…

"As long as they stay outside, leave them alone," the Sergeant reminded them. "But be prepared to act if they break down the gates or come over the wall."

Sidney stared at the crowd in growing horror. It was a jumbled mass of humanity, but every so often he saw an individual face. A young man, barely older than himself; a girl barely entering her teens; an older man with a tired worn expression; a woman old enough to be a grandmother. None of them looked happy, he realised; the crowd was pushing them forwards, even though some of them clearly wanted to escape. And weapons were being passed out; sticks, stones and even a handful of bottles. It took him a moment to realise that they were loaded with gas, ready to set fire to the building.

Their resentment was almost palatable. It felt odd, as if they didn't really resent the Marines, merely their presence. Sidney realised, in a flash of insight, that the crowd wanted to get its hands on the planet's former governors. They'd betrayed the population, somehow, even though Sidney couldn't really imagine how it was their fault. The Thousand Families were based hundreds of light years from Tyson. None of the governors had known that the rebellion was

about to begin.

He shuddered. The Marines wore lightweight powered armour and the crowd didn't look to have any weapons capable of penetrating their protection, but if it came down to a fight a lot of civilians were going to die. Sidney had been through a modified training course, including one horrific simulation where they'd been shown precisely what happened when the suit was matched against unarmoured people. Bones had been shattered like twigs, skulls had been smashed to pulp; none of the simulated enemies had even been able to break into the suit and drag the Marine out.

The crowd grew louder and nastier. A handful of rocks came sailing over the wall, seemingly tossed at random. They didn't come close to any of the Marines. Even so, Sidney's hands felt sweaty as he gripped his rifle. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt any of the civilians, but he knew they would have no choice if the walls collapsed. It looked as though the crowd was putting intense pressure on the stone.

"We're transferring the governors and their staff to the shuttles," the Sergeant said. "Once the complex is clear, we'll pull out."

He must have decided that the buildings are indefensible, Sidney thought. The crowd was getting louder, several young men working hard to psych up the rest for a charge. *Or expendable*.

A dull roar of anger echoed through the air as the crowd saw the governors being pushed towards the shuttles. There was a loud crack as the gate broke open. Sidney cursed out loud, despite the order to maintain strict communications discipline, then lifted his rifle and fired warning shots over the crowd's heads. It didn't work. The pressure of the people at the rear kept pushing the people at the front forward, even if they'd changed their minds after seeing the Marines up close. Sidney braced himself, unsure of what to do. If they opened fire, there would be a massacre.

"Deploy gas," the Sergeant ordered.

"Yes, sir," Post said.

Sidney watched as gas shells crashed down amongst the rioters. Blue gas sprayed everywhere; the rioters disintegrated into a churning mass of panicky civilians as the gas worked its way into their eyes and throat. They stumbled everywhere, some of them knocked to the ground and trampled by their fellows; Sidney saw a young boy crushed to death before he could do anything to intervene.

"RETURN TO YOUR HOMES," the Sergeant bellowed, through his suit's loudspeaker. His voice drowned out the panic from the crowd. "GO HOME, REMAIN THERE."

"You know," Howell remarked, as the rioters slowly dispersed, "I thought we were meant to be liberating these people."

Sidney rolled his eyes. Who could trust planet-dwellers to have any common sense? The rioters had only managed to hurt themselves. There were at least a dozen bodies on the ground, mixed in with choking people who had had a bad reaction to the gas. But at least the Marines hadn't had to chop the crowd to pieces. There was no such thing as strength in numbers when one side was armed with plasma cannon and rail guns.

"They're stupid panicky idiots," the Sergeant said, sharply. Behind them, the first shuttles took off, clawing for sky. "Do what you can for the wounded, place the bodies somewhere out of the way. Hopefully, we won't have to set up an administration for the entire planet."

Sidney reflected on the Sergeant's words as they patrolled the outer edge of the walls — and then the nearby streets, ensuring that looting and rioting was kept as far from their positions as possible. Planet-dwellers didn't seem to have the intrinsic concern for their environment of the space-born. The moment the planet's government had surrendered, he saw, the civilians had started to riot. And there was nothing he and his comrades could do.

The populace, those they saw, looked bitter and resentful. Sidney shook his head in disbelief. Didn't these people know they'd been liberated from the Empire? But it looked as though they honestly didn't care — or didn't realise that it would be better after the Thousand Families were destroyed. And yet… he shook his head, grimly. These people had been lucky. The Empire hadn't come down on them too hard. They had no conception of what life was like elsewhere…

By the time they were finally recalled to the ships, he was thoroughly sick of the population on the ground.

* * *

It wasn't too surprising, Colin knew, that there were a handful of cabins in the superdreadnaught that were thoroughly wired for sound, despite being intended for senior officers. Imperial Navy officers and crewmen had no right to privacy, no matter what they thought; Imperial Intelligence heard and saw everything that took place on the starship. It seemed to have escaped their attention that there was so much data they couldn't hope to analyse it all, Colin had decided, although Anderson had pointed out that the intimidation value alone was worth the effort. Colin, after all, had held most of his planning meetings on Jackson's Folly.

Admiral Ravi Lanai, according to her file, wasn't an experienced officer. Colin had expected someone older, with more time on a

command deck, but he had to admit that was nothing more than prejudice. Ravi had certainly given him a hard time, even if she hadn't managed to stop the rebel advance. But he knew that she hadn't had the firepower to win. The question, Colin knew, was if her superiors would see it that way.

He nodded politely to her as he opened the hatch and stepped into the cabin. Ravi was seated on a sofa, reading her way through a book. She looked older than Stacy Roosevelt, as if she hadn't really bothered to have her body kept young. But then, she did project an air of maturity that would have been utterly out of place on Stacy's teenage body. Colin shuddered at the memory, then sat down facing Ravi. Maybe there was time to have a proper talk.

"Admiral," he said, carefully. "You fought well."

Ravi's lips quirked. "As did you."

Colin waited, then continued when it was obvious she wasn't going to say anything else. "I understand that you want to return to the Empire," he said. "Can I ask why?"

"It's my duty," Ravi said, simply. "My family have always been loyalists."

"I read your file," Colin said. "You've been quite lucky."

Ravi nodded, but said nothing.

"Your people speak well of you," Colin continued. "We have only had a relative handful of recruits from your crews, despite the beating they took at our hands. Quite a few of them have insisted on returning to the Empire. I think you had quite a bit to do with their loyalty."

"Thank you," Ravi said.

Colin studied her for a long moment. Ravi *had* been lucky. With so many competing interests in the system, she had been able to carry out her duty with only a minimum of political interference. She was unlikely to rise any higher, but then she was already high enough to suit her ambitions. Besides, when she retired, she could look forward to quite a few patrons ensuring that she had a comfortable retirement. The smarter patrons knew to ensure that they looked after their clients until the end of their lives.

"They're going to die," Colin said. He didn't *know* for sure that whoever was in command at Morrison would kill the returning crewmen, but he knew how Percival had treated those who'd had enough loyalty to return home. They'd been interrogated and brain-sucked, then dumped on Camelot. Colin had rescued some of them when the planet had been taken, but others had died before he arrived. "And you too, for that matter."

"I still have to report," Ravi said, stubbornly. "And I would prefer not to be interned."

"You will be blamed for the defeat here," Colin warned her.

“They’ll look for someone they can hold to account — and you will make an easy scapegoat. If you’re not interested in joining us, you should consider being interned. We won’t treat you badly…”

Ravi looked up, her dark eyes meeting his. “Why do you care?”

Colin hesitated, then admitted the truth. “The Thousand Families are going to be destroyed,” he said. “But there is still going to be an Empire afterwards — and an Imperial Navy. You could serve, Admiral. We need officers who can inspire such loyalty and devotion in their men.”

“But that would be a betrayal,” Ravi said. She didn’t take her eyes from his face. “How do you know that whatever you create, whatever replaces the Empire, will be better than its predecessor?”

“I know that the Empire cannot be allowed to go on,” Colin countered. “It is draining the lifeblood from humanity. It has pretty much reached the limits of worlds it can simply invade, occupy and start exploiting. Already, the Thousand Families are turning on each other. What happens when their struggle turns physical?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Ravi pointed out. “How do you know that your Empire will be better than *our* Empire?”

Colin frowned. “I have faith,” he said. “We can solve most of the problems caused by the Empire, break up the power and economic blocs that keep it under control…”

“And then… what?” Ravi asked. “You don’t know you’ll do better. What will you do the moment someone defies you? Or wants to leave the Empire? Human disunity almost killed us once; are you prepared to accept disunity and the risks that come with it… or will you use force to keep the Empire together? And if you do, *Commander* Walker, what makes you any better than the Thousand Families?”

She looked at Colin’s hands, then smiled. “Are you going to beat me for disagreeing with you?”

Colin realised that he’d clenched his fists. Slowly, he unclenched them and clasped his hands behind his back, fighting for calm. Ravi was right, he had to admit; shattering the Thousand Families and their grip on power would unleash forces that might tear the Empire apart. But he still believed that those forces could be accommodated. If each planet had internal autonomy, it would be harder for outsiders to exploit them…

“No,” he said, coldly. “If you won’t join us, we will make arrangements for you to be transported to Morrison.”

“Thank you,” Ravi said, primly. She picked up her book and opened it, looking down at the page. “Was there anything else?”

Colin scowled in irritation. “Merely that I think you’re wasted,” Colin said. “You’ll be killed at Morrison, killed for losing to superior force. They won’t stop looking for scapegoats just because you fought

well. And I doubt your patrons will lift a finger to help you."

"I know the risks," Ravi said, closing her book. "But I am loyal to the Empire."

"I had that certainty once too," Colin admitted. He stood, then looked down at her. "I hope you survive, Admiral. We *will* need people like you after we win the war."

He strode out of the cabin, then nodded to the Marine on duty outside. "Don't let anyone see her," he ordered. "She can be transferred to the freighter once the life support is checked out."

"Yes, sir," the Marine said.

Colin's communicator buzzed. "Admiral," his XO said, "a space yacht has just entered the system. They're broadcasting a message, requesting to speak with you."

"A yacht?" Colin repeated. The only people who could afford dedicated pleasure starships were the aristocracy. Someone from the Thousand Families? "Do we have an IFF?"

"Nothing that matches anything in our database," the XO reported. "What do you want to do?"

Colin considered it, briefly. "Tell them to keep their distance," he ordered. It was possible that someone had placed a bomb on the starship, but it wouldn't be powerful enough to take out the entire fleet. "Have the Marines board the ship, then check out the passengers. If they are clean, they can be brought onboard and I'll speak to them. If not, we can deal with it at once."

"Yes, sir," the XO said.

"And ask Daria to join us," Colin added. The fleet train had arrived just after Tyson had fallen. "She should be a part of any discussions."

Chapter Eighteen

Lord Pompey Cicero knew that he was considered stodgy and unimaginative. It wasn't something that bothered him, not when he considered the other family members of his generation. Only a handful were really interested in anything other than enjoying themselves and not all of *those* could be trusted with anything significant. When he'd taken up a position in the family's security force, he'd known it was a vote of confidence from the Family Head — and an acknowledgement that Pompey wouldn't seek pleasure at the expense of the family.

It had been relatively simple picking a possible rebel target before Morrison, although he had to admit that he'd nearly gotten it wrong. *Passion* had lurked in a nearby system for a week before the courier boat had arrived, warning the system authorities that the rebels had attacked Tyson. Cursing his own oversight, Pompey had brought the drive online and flickered into the Tyson System even before Gwendolyn had climbed out of her bunk. He didn't want to know what she was doing, but they'd spent as little time together as possible while they'd been on the ship.

Gwendolyn came onto the bridge and took a seat, watching as the rebel shuttle approached their starship. Pompey didn't really like her; she might have had a mind like a steel trap, but she was almost terrifyingly ambitious. Given enough time, she might even be able to put together a challenge to the Family Head. Pompey knew that competition was one of the sources of strength, yet this was no time for competition. The Empire itself was at stake.

"So," Gwendolyn said, running her fingers through her long blonde hair, "are we there yet?"

Pompey rolled his eyes. It was quite possible, he knew, that the rebels would simply take them captive and try to ransom them back to the family. Kidnapping an aristocrat bore the death sentence, but the rebels could hardly be executed *twice*. By now, they'd probably earned at least five or six death sentences apiece.

"Yes," he said, simply. "I suggest that you try to restrain yourself when they board the ship. I do not believe they will feel inclined to defer to you."

He gave her a sharp look. She wore a long white dress that was near-transparent in all the right places. It would be hard to imagine anything *less* like a diplomat… unless, of course, she wanted to be underestimated. The Thousand Families were heirs to a rejuvenation technology that could have a man of two hundred look barely twenty, but they did tend to disregard youth. Gwendolyn might well have

profited, in the past, by looking young, nubile and innocent.

"And I'd tell you to change, if we had time," he added. "But they're almost here."

A dull thump echoed through the hull as the shuttle docked with the forward airlock. The hatch hissed open a moment later, allowing the Marines to step into the ship. They looked alert, Pompey noted, although there was something about their movements that suggested they were very new or that they'd had very limited training. But there had always been a shortage of Marines, even before questions had been raised about their political reliability. It would have been easy for them to take control of a number of starships and start a revolution.

"Welcome onboard," he said, calmly. "Please, make yourself at home."

"Please remain where you are," the Marine ordered. "Is there anyone else onboard this ship?"

"No," Pompey said. Gwendolyn had started complaining, after the second day, that there was no one to do the hard work of cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. Pompey had taken it in his stride. Besides, his clothes were relatively simple. "We're alone."

The Marines didn't take his word for it, unsurprisingly. Two of them remained on the bridge, not quite pointing their weapons at Pompey and Gwendolyn, while the remainder searched the ship from end to end. They didn't find anything; *Passion* was unarmed, designed to be operated by a single person, as long as the automatics held out. Eventually, the Marines placed the entire ship into shutdown mode and led the two visitors into the shuttle. Inside, their bodies were thoroughly scanned, then confirmed clean. Pompey had even removed the implanted weapons he'd been given when he'd qualified as a security officer.

"Take a seat," the Marine ordered, pointing to a pair of metal chairs. "We'll have you on the superdreadnaught soon enough."

Pompey nodded. Gwendolyn, for a wonder, kept her mouth shut. The Marines were being fairly decent, under the circumstances. If Pompey had been in charge of supervising unexpected guests, he would have searched them more carefully. But that would have been inconsiderate.

He smiled inwardly as the shuttle disengaged from the starship. They'd made it — and they'd made contact with the rebels. Now the ball was in Gwendolyn's court.

* * *

“Interesting,” Colin commented, as the two newcomers were escorted out of the shuttle and marched towards the conference room that had been put aside for the meeting. “What do you think they want?”

“Lord Pompey and Lady Gwendolyn, both from the Cicero Family,” Mariko commented. It was rare to hear her speak at all, certainly not before Daria. “Both quite young, in age as well as body. Pompey is twenty-seven, according to the files; Gwendolyn is twenty-two. I think they’re probably rated as expendable if the talks go badly wrong.”

She paused. “But the Family Head is also unusually young,” she added. “He might be more flexible than the others.”

Colin nodded. It did make a certain kind of sense. The Thousand Families were dominated by the elderly, many of whom had allowed themselves to ossify mentally. It was true of the Imperial Navy too, he knew. The Admirals at Luna Base were often old enough to be Colin’s grandparents, but they still refused to retire gracefully and allow the young to move up and take their places.

“You clearly didn’t waste your time,” Daria said. “What else did you pull from the files?”

“Almost nothing about them specifically,” Mariko admitted. “The files rarely hold detailed information on non-naval personnel.”

There was a tap on the hatch. Colin tapped his console and the hatch opened, revealing the Marines and the two newcomers. He deactivated the monitor screen and stood as the newcomers were shown into the compartment, studying them both carefully. There was an air of competence around Pompey that he would have found reassuring, if they’d been on the same side. He was bland, utterly inoffensive… and his eyes were observing everything. It was impossible to escape the feeling that, young as he was, Pompey was a formidable man.

Gwendolyn was younger, wearing a dress that showed her assets to best advantage. Colin couldn’t help a flicker of attraction, which he fought down ruthlessly. Gwendolyn had clearly dressed to short-circuit their minds and it was working. Her face was perfect, the result of genetic engineering or cosmetic surgery, her hair shone like the sun. But her eyes were flickering everywhere, drinking in the entire compartment. No matter what she looked like, he realised, she was very capable at her chosen field. Her family had chosen its emissary very carefully.

“Welcome onboard,” Colin said, once the newcomers had sat down and the Marines had withdrawn. “I trust you’ll understand if we choose to forgo protocol for diplomatic meetings. It has been so long since they were actually *necessary* that we were unable to discover

what the protocol actually was."

Gwendolyn gave him a smile that was surprisingly sweet. "I quite understand," she agreed, warmly. "Protocols have been out of date for centuries."

Colin fought down the urge to snort rudely. The Empire's idea of diplomacy boiled down to pointing a gun at someone who had something the Empire wanted and ordering them to hand it over — or else. And there had never been any hesitation about applying the stick if the carrot failed, assuming there *was* a carrot. There had been no attempt to bargain with Jackson's Folly and her daughter worlds, even though it would have cost the Empire nothing to try to dicker. The Thousand Families had once owned the biggest stick in the known universe. Applying it had become second nature.

He studied Gwendolyn for a long moment, then smiled. "Let's be blunt," he said. "Why are you here?"

Gwendolyn placed her fingertips together and leaned forward, calling attention to her cleavage. "My family feels that we should attempt to open lines of communication," she said. "There may be grounds for a mutually acceptable compromise."

Colin lifted his eyebrows, deliberately exaggerating the gesture. "Our objective is to replace or reform the Empire," he said. "That would include splitting up the Thousand Families into more manageable entities, at the very least, and removing all the laws they created to boost their own position at everyone else's expense. I confess I have no idea what your family would consider a mutually acceptable compromise. Our goals are in complete opposition to yours."

"Thank you for being blunt," Gwendolyn said. She gave him a charming smile. "You must realise that destroying something the size of the Empire will be difficult. I do not believe that you have a significant advantage in firepower, even if you do have the assistance of the Geeks and Nerds. The further you move from your bases, the harder it will be to support your offensive."

She was right, Colin knew, although they'd raided enemy bases for supplies. Tyson alone had given them enough missiles and spare parts to keep the offensive going for months, unless missile expenditures skyrocketed. Which might well happen, he had to admit. The closer they got to Earth, the more heavily defended worlds they would have to reduce or occupy. It was quite possible that the offensive would grind to a halt just short of Earth.

"You might be surprised," he said, instead. He schooled his expression to remain calm, wondering just how good she was at reading people. It was possible that she had more experience than a standard intelligence officer. The Thousand Families could afford the

best training for their children. “But what is your point?”

“Either way, a long war would be utterly devastating and whoever won would have to spend years picking up the pieces,” Gwendolyn said. “Economic ties would shatter, planets would starve… I believe you know the possible consequences. And the aliens would take advantage of our distraction to attempt to turn on us…”

This time, Colin snorted out loud. There were ten intelligent races known to exist, apart from humanity, and nine of them were effectively helpless, kept under such firm control that they couldn’t even build anything more dangerous than a steam engine. The tenth race had vanished long ago and no one had seen a trace of them since then. Unless there was another race out in the Beyond with an Empire that matched humanity’s — and he doubted it, because the Empire wouldn’t have hesitated to brand them a threat if they existed — aliens were no threat to humanity.

And humanity had exterminated two intelligent races…

“I think we both know that the aliens are in no position to turn on us,” he said, finally. “It is far more likely that they will be exterminated in the crossfire.”

Gwendolyn didn’t show any overt response to his rudeness. “The costs in both financial and personnel terms of a long war will be devastating,” she said. “I believe we can agree on that point, can’t we?”

“Perhaps,” Daria said. She leaned forward, crossing her arms under her ample breasts. “But the costs of allowing the Empire to exist are also devastating.”

“We don’t doubt that you feel that way,” Gwendolyn said. “However, you must ask yourself if it is really worth the cost of bringing us down if you bring yourself down at the same time.”

Colin tapped the table. “I confess that verbal fighting doesn’t interest me nearly as much as starship combat,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “We will provisionally concede your point.”

Gwendolyn smiled, brilliantly. “Then you will hear us out?”

“Get to the point,” Colin growled. “What are you offering us?”

“We would be prepared to listen to your concerns,” Gwendolyn said. “And we would handle them…”

Colin laughed, humourlessly. “And you’d like us to surrender our ships on your word alone?”

“There are reforms we could make,” Gwendolyn pointed out. “Reforms that would eliminate the need for a revolution…”

“But you would be asking us to trust that you would make those reforms,” Colin countered, sardonically. “Do you expect us to just *trust* you?”

“Not particularly,” Gwendolyn said. She shrugged, her face

suddenly serious. “Right now, the Thousand Families are the glue that holds the Empire together. We control almost all of the Empire’s industry, much of the Imperial Navy and employ a very large percentage of the population. There are so many people under our control that even we couldn’t tell you just how many work for us, directly or indirectly. That is the truth of the edifice we have built up over a thousand years.”

Colin nodded, impatiently. “I know,” he said. “The point is certainly repeated often enough, isn’t it?”

Gwendolyn met his eyes. “Let us assume that you succeed,” she said. “The Thousand Families are shattered. What happens to the billions upon billions of people who work for us, directly or indirectly, if you bring that mighty edifice tumbling down?”

Daria coughed. “What happens to the billions upon billions of your victims if the edifice is left in place?”

Gwendolyn ignored her, focusing her attention on Colin. “We can reform the system, slowly and gently,” she said. “That will not bring it falling down, thus avoiding billions of people being thrown out of work and left to starve. But if you destroy the system…”

“People will suffer,” Colin snapped. “We get the point.”

He stared at Gwendolyn, daring her to look away. “What do you have to offer us?”

“We don’t yet know who will win,” Gwendolyn said. She didn’t look away; instead, she met his eyes evenly. “But we know that you might attain a decisive advantage. In that case, we would like to propose a compromise. We will surrender political power in exchange for being allowed to retain our economic power. It will give us time to adapt to the reshaped universe without tossing billions of people onto the streets.”

“Interesting,” Colin observed, finally. “And this is an offer from *all* of the Thousand Families or just yours?”

“Ours, for the moment,” Gwendolyn said. “We believe that the others would consider the compromise if the alternative was certain destruction.”

Daria smirked. “And what is to stop us sharing the recording of this meeting with the rest of the aristocracy?”

“Why, nothing,” Gwendolyn said. “Except, of course, there will be no further talks. Either you lose, because you were too stubbornly prideful to talk and compromise, or you win and the Empire shatters, forcing you to put it back together. And you know the consequences of that will be, at the very least, an interstellar dark age. Will you be able to hold even the Core Worlds together if the Thousand Families are gone?”

“I see,” Colin said. “You are here, then, not to open talks, but to

discuss the possibility of talks. Talks based on us winning or losing or gaining a decisive advantage."

"Essentially," Gwendolyn said. "The Thousand Families will not talk to you, let alone compromise, until they are convinced that further fighting would be pointless."

Colin rubbed his forehead, again. "And what," he asked, "is to stop us from turning on them later?"

"We have no idea how you plan to reform the economic sphere," Gwendolyn said. "The propaganda we picked up from the underground before we left Earth was very much a mixed bag. But we know it will take years for the economy to adjust to the chance, let alone allow competitors to rise up and threaten us. You can surrender your starships, but we cannot surrender our control over the economic levers of power."

"We could simply take your industrial nodes," Daria pointed out. "What's to stop us from doing that, *My Lady*?"

Gwendolyn didn't show any reaction to Daria's tone. "The Empire's economy depends on thousands of pieces functioning smoothly together," she said, simply. "Yes, you could seize control of a handful of industrial nodes. You still wouldn't be able to run them without rebuilding the entire network from scratch. Even convincing people that they couldn't trust you to respect private property would do considerable damage. It will take you years to replace the system, by which time we will have adapted — or died out."

Colin gave her a long considering look. "You believe your people will die out?"

"I believe that the Thousand Families will have to adapt," Gwendolyn said. "If specific families fail, they will be replaced by their competitors and vanish into nothingness."

"Thank you for coming," Colin said, dryly. He wasn't sure if he was sincere or not. "You two will be granted private quarters, but you will be under restriction. Should you cause any trouble, you will both go out the airlock."

He called for the Marines, who took the two ambassadors away.

"Well," Daria said, once the hatch had closed. "*That* was interesting."

"Very interesting," Colin agreed. "I wish Hester was here. She could do a better job of sorting out what they told us."

He looked down at the desk, thinking hard. If Gwendolyn and Pompey were to be trusted — although Pompey hadn't said a word — there were already cracks appearing in the Empire's united front. Who knew how best it could be exploited? But, at the same time, they would have to be careful. Gwendolyn was clearly far more experienced in deceit than Colin himself.

“True,” Daria agreed. She smiled, but there was no real humour in the expression. “We’ll have to be careful they don’t talk us into signing the future over to them.”

Chapter Nineteen

"We are facing a planned sabotage campaign," Colonel Gordon said. He was a Rothschild client, but he had enough sense to realise that now wasn't the time to promote his patron's interests. "All signs point to a large group — and probably one linked to the underground."

Tiberius carefully kept his expression under control. He'd concluded that weeks ago, after his security officers had finally tracked down the person responsible for the chaos virus and interrogated her thoroughly. It was unlikely in the extreme that rebels from the edge of the Empire could have set up operations on Luna so quickly unless they'd had help from the Luna Underground. They'd managed to kidnap children just to force someone into helping them, for crying out loud! They could only have done that with help.

But the chaos attack hadn't been the only burst of sabotage. Several other computer cores had been infected with chaos viruses, a number of processors had been reprogrammed to pass imperfect starship components while rejecting perfectly good ones and two Blackshirt training camps had been sent poison instead of conditioning drugs. Thousands of young men were now dead, setting the entire program back weeks if not months. No, the underground was getting bolder — and pushing the limits as far as they would go. He wouldn't be surprised to discover that they already had operatives on dozens of starships and orbital platforms.

"So we act," Lord Bernadotte snapped. "Send down the Blackshirts and flush the damn bastards out. God knows we cannot allow this to continue."

Tiberius had to admit he was right. Home Fleet was in a poor condition, even without active sabotage. If there were more life support failures, crewmen would start deserting in droves –or contemplating mutiny. The life expectancy of a starship that mutinied in Earth orbit would be very low, but it would be able to do considerable damage to the planet before it was destroyed. Who knew what would happen if someone sabotaged other parts of the defences?

"The underground is very good at hiding," Lord Rothschild countered. "The effort might be futile."

"Then have the crews switched around," Tiberius snapped. "While we're at it, we might want to provide additional security for our employees. They can be threatened into working for the underground even if they're not inclined to turn on us."

He'd forced himself to watch Marian Fairchild's entire interrogation, from beginning to end, even though he'd thrown up

twice. Imperial Intelligence had not been gentle; they'd beaten her, inserted torture implants into her skull and even threatened her children in front of her eyes. But, in the end, they'd discovered that the children had been kidnapped… and that the kidnappers were long gone. By the time the security forces had started to sweep the Luna warrens, it was too late even to identify them. He'd signed the execution order knowing that Marian had been forced to serve the underground. But there had been no choice. An example had to be made.

It had taken weeks to flush out the chaos virus — or, for that matter, the virus that had somehow made its way into Public Information's computers. Before anyone knew what had happened, an underground-produced report had been uploaded into the datanet and distributed to everyone in the Sol System. The code had ensured that billions of people had seen the report before it had been wiped from the system. And the report claimed that the Thousand Families were on the brink of losing control of the Empire.

The only upside is that we weren't the only ones hit, he thought. The Cicero Family wouldn't be blamed for being careless if *all* of the families had been targeted. *But we're no closer to actually winning the war*.

He glanced down at the latest report from Morrison as Lord Bernadotte and Lord Rothschild resumed their argument, the other Family Heads lining up on one side or the other. Admiral Wachter was still making enemies, but thankfully the sabotage campaign had distracted the Families Council from considering the matter. The Admiral was optimistic about their chances when the rebels finally attacked; Tiberius could only hope he was right.

The argument seemed to be winding down, so he took a chance and jumped in. "We need to finally appoint someone to command Home Fleet," he said. "I believe that Lord Rothschild has a proposal."

Lord Rothschild tossed him an inscrutable look, then nodded. "Admiral Foster would appear to be our best bet," he said. "He has ties to the Thousand Families, but never showed interest in anything more than squadron command up until his retirement. While Home Fleet is larger than anything he has commanded prior to retirement, I believe he would meet all three of our requirements."

Tiberius concealed his amusement. It said a great deal about the Empire that only one of the requirements involved actually defeating the rebels. The Families Council was more worried about not upsetting the balance of power and not accidentally creating a second Empress, someone who used Home Fleet to take control of the Empire. But then, Admiral Foster would not command Earth's fixed or orbital defences. If he did turn on the Empire, he couldn't win before the

spies on his ship killed him. Or so they hoped.

There was another long debate, but no one seemed to want to prolong the argument long enough to make it go away. Instead, Admiral Foster was formally recalled from retirement and assigned to command Home Fleet. Tiberius hoped — prayed — that they'd finally broken the logjam in time to prepare Home Fleet for battle, then tried to tune out as much of the ensuring debate as possible. His father had once told him that the Families Council was only allowed to make one resolution per day. Tiberius knew that wasn't actually true, but it might as well have been.

Afterwards, he disconnected from the network and walked back into his office. Sharon was waiting for him, along with two officers from the personnel department. Tiberius took his chair, then turned to face them. They promptly bowed deeply, then relaxed.

"I don't have much time," Tiberius said. It was a lie, but lower-ranking officers — particularly ones with only weak family ties — were prone to going on and on, trying to exaggerate their own importance. "Have you completed the moves?"

"Yes, sir," the senior officer said. "Everyone with a family has had the family moved to a secure complex, guarded by Household Troops. The facilities are being improved even as we speak, but the costs…"

"Fuck the costs," Tiberius snapped. One chaos virus attack, launched by someone whose children had been at risk, had cost trillions of credits and a number of lives. If they'd missed one fragment of the virus, just one, it might reform and start infecting computer cores again. "I want everyone to know that their families are *safe*!"

"Yes, sir," the senior officer said.

Tiberius understood his surprise. The Thousand Families had never been good at caring for their workers, apart from the handful who showed enough promise to be brought into the Families — and *that* had grown rarer and rarer as the Thousand Families solidified their grip on power. But now the underground was using that weakness against them. A person who might have been so completely loyal that they'd passed countless security checks could be turned in an instant, if their families were harmed. It was worth some expense to ensure that the families were protected.

But the logistics were staggering. There were *millions* of employees on Earth. Protecting all of their families was a difficult task…

"It will be handled," Sharon assured him.

Tiberius nodded. "One other matter," he added. "You will ensure that the Fairchild children are sent to a good home. They don't need to be overshadowed by the past."

“Yes, My Lord,” Sharon said. She didn’t seem surprised by his decision. “Should they be assigned to a colony world?”

“Somewhere reasonably decent,” Tiberius ordered. He looked up at the two personnel officers. “I want your full reports by the end of the week.”

They left, no doubt glad to be away from Tiberius. Sharon remained, looking down at him with an odd expression on her face. After a moment, Tiberius quirked an eyebrow. She looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded in understanding.

“You’re being kind to the children,” she said. “That’s better than your peers would have done.”

“I know,” Tiberius said. His peers — the Family Heads — were older than him by several decades, at the very least. They wouldn’t care about the children, even if they understood that the children had been innocent victims. Their mother had to die — Tiberius couldn’t have changed that — but they didn’t have to join her. Or be sentenced to a penal colony. “Make sure they have something to rely on, if they go to a colony world. Maybe one of the ones founded by lesser family.”

Once, thousands of colonies had been settled by eccentrics from Earth. Rogue groups, religious factions, people who merely wanted to get away… but that had come to an end when the Empire had started tightening the screws. Now, the only people who founded colonies were the Thousand Families, most of them designed to start paying off as soon as possible. But a handful were designed to stand on their own. It wasn’t something Tiberius had ever approved of, but he could see the value. And besides, those worlds weren’t involved in the war.

It struck him, suddenly, that he had never met the children, that he had only seen their images when they were being threatened by the interrogators. And yet he still felt guilty for what he’d had done to them — and what would have been done to them, if their mother hadn’t talked. Sending them to a decent colony was the very least he could do.

“There’s a world founded by an idiot who fancies himself an artist,” he said, slowly. There were times when he envied that man, even though the decision to leave the High City seemed foolish. The artist had no responsibilities beyond his art. “Maybe they’d like to go there.”

He looked down at his hands. They were clean, perfectly manicured… and yet he knew they were covered with blood. Decisions made casually in the Families Council resulted in very real hardship for the people under his authority. He’d made those decisions without every worrying about the people, until now. But was he considering them now because he’d seen one of them tortured

until she'd been stripped mentally naked — or because some of the victims had risen up against the Empire?

The Empire was necessary. He knew that for a fact. But was the suffering also necessary?

He looked up at Sharon. "Did I do the right thing?"

Sharon lifted her eyebrows. She was loyal — she had no choice, but to be loyal — but it was rare for Tiberius to ask her advice. And yet, who else could he ask? Admiral Wachter was at Morrison, a month away even in the fastest courier boat, while the other senior family members would always keep their eye on the prize. They'd *want* to see him weaken himself by asking for advice, or even reassurance. It was lonely up at the top.

"I think it doesn't matter what happens to the children," Sharon said, finally. "You could do far worse to them, innocent or not."

She was right, Tiberius knew. The whole idea of law and justice was a joke when the Thousand Families were involved. No one would have said anything if he'd had the children killed, or thrown down to Earth to fend for themselves, or even thrown into the brothels despite their young age. There was no law for the Thousand Families, no matter what they did; there were no pleasures, no matter how perverse, denied to them. In the end, he realised, he was looking at the ultimate end result of untrammelled power. There was nothing that members of his family could not do.

There was no *point* in punishing the children. It wasn't as if they could gain anything by punishing the children. But too many aristocrats would have done it anyway, because they could. Because no one would have told them no.

"Yeah," he said, finally. "I know."

Sharon leaned forward. "Is that really what you want to know?"

Tiberius hesitated, then lifted his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I think you were asking me about more than just the children," Sharon said. "You were asking about the Empire as a whole. Is it *right* to keep such tight control over countless planets and settlements and uncounted trillions of people?"

"Good question," Tiberius agreed. "And how can you even ask that question?"

Sharon snorted. "I cannot actively act against your interests, nor can I let something happen against your interests without trying to stop it," she said. "The Mind Techs ensured that I would be loyal and obedient — and I've accepted that as perfectly normal, even though rationally I should be outraged. But that doesn't stop me considering such questions, or bringing them to your attention should you ask. Because… I have to know what your interests actually are, before I act

in them."

Tiberius felt his eyes narrow. "Who defines my best interests?"

"You do," Sharon said. She snorted, again. "The Mind Techs were not allowed to suggest that I — or someone else — might define your best interests for you."

"Creepy," Tiberius said.

"Exactly," Sharon agreed. "Do you see the problem?"

"You volunteered," Tiberius said. "I read your file. You were offered an excellent rate of pay and superb retirement package in exchange for accepting the conditioning."

"I know that," Sharon said. "But don't you see the point? The Mind Techs and the people who recruited me treated me as an object. They thought I could be reprogrammed to suit their desires — even if all they gave me was loyalty, I wasn't the same after I stood up from the machine. And if it wasn't for the fact the treatment slowly wears down initiative and imagination, you'd do it to everyone. You already do to the Blackshirts. Wouldn't you like to do the same to the Imperial Navy?"

Her face twisted into a smile. "If you could, you would," she added. "Who would worry about a mutiny if everyone was conditioned into service? Oh, you'd have reason to worry if your conditioned pawns ever had to face a real emergency. But you tacitly assumed for centuries that there would never be another interstellar war. Why *not* seek to condition everyone?

"And where does it end? The entire human race turned into a ant colony, with only a handful of people still possessing free will?

"You'd love to wield such power. Even if you didn't, the other Family Heads would want it. And why not? It would make them safe forever. All it would cost them is treating everyone like objects. And that's why you have a rebellion on your hands now. You've been treating people as objects so long that they've finally had enough of it."

Tiberius forced himself to remain calm, even though her words cut at him. "We wouldn't do *that*…"

"You've been doing it all along," Sharon said. "Loyalty training, promoting your clients ahead of the competent, even insisting on your personal servants being conditioned. Why *wouldn't* you condition everyone in the Empire if you could work out the logistics?"

She sat back, then smiled again. "Think about it," she said. "Those poor children. Their dead mother. The workers who aren't promoted because they're not seen as politically reliable. The starship crewmen who aren't offered a chance to shine because they might try to take power for themselves, or because they won't kiss the ass of people born to their rank and station. The miners who are left to

starve because maintaining their colony is not cost-effective. The colonists who are dumped on a lethal world, expected to develop it into something liveable or die trying. All of them have hopes and dreams, aspirations and plans… and you destroy them casually, because it suits you. Because of a balance statement, or because of your fears, or even because you're grouchy one morning."

Tiberius stared at her. "I have never destroyed lives because I was grouchy one morning."

Sharon met his eyes. "Are you sure of that?"

"I don't know," Tiberius admitted. He looked up at her, wonderingly. He'd never given much thought to the conditioned, apart from noting that they were loyal and unimaginative — but then, most of the ones he encountered were slaves. "What do you think I should do?"

"Try to remember that you're not dealing with numbers in an account statement," Sharon advised. "You've already made one step forward by helping the vulnerable. Now you can try and see what else you can do."

"And see if the rebels will talk instead of destroying us," Tiberius said. By his calculations, Gwendolyn and Pompey should have encountered the rebels by now. But he knew there was little they could offer until the rebels scored a decisive victory. And, if the rebels lost, there would be no need to negotiate. "Thank you for your advice."

He watched her go, mulling over what she'd said. It had honestly never occurred to him that she could provide such profound insight, particularly as her boundaries were almost as limited as his own. But then, she knew her own condition, even if she wasn't really allowed to think about it. Tiberius was just as much as slave as Sharon, with the added complication that he couldn't really leave. He would be Family Head until the day he died…

Unless they do manage to unseat me, he thought. Shaking his head, he pulled up the next report and started to read. Unless that day came, he had his duty. *And then someone else will be stuck with the job*.

Chapter Twenty

"That's all of the freighters loaded, sir."

"It's about bloody time," Commodore Viand snapped. He glared down at the display, which showed the freighters slowly disengaging from the supply dump. "Have they finally managed to slave their navigational computers together or are we going to have to make multiple jumps?"

"They have, sir," the communications officer said.

Viand nodded. He knew he was being unfair, but he didn't really care. He'd expected to be sent to Morrison to join the Imperial Navy squadrons there. Instead, he'd been detailed to convoy escort as bases surrounding Morrison were stripped of everything from spare parts to personnel to keep the Morrison Fleet operating. Given it's condition, Viand rather suspected that it would take years before the fleet was ready for anything other than the scrapheap, but Admiral Wachter hadn't asked his opinion before starting work.

"Then tell them to assume formation," he ordered, tiredly. "Inform me as soon as we are ready to depart."

He sat back in his chair, fighting down irritation at the civilians who had been conscripted into the Imperial Navy. None of them were very happy about it, despite being promised double-pay for their service. They'd only grudgingly gone to work and loaded up the freighters, dawdling as much as possible. If there hadn't been a handful of naval personnel on each ship, Viand would have worried about them jumping in the wrong direction and taking their cargos to the highest bidder. Imperial Navy spares were highly prized along the Rim, if only because they tended to be better-built than the civilian-produced models.

And most of the civilian freighters were old, fifth or sixth-hand by the time they reached their current owners. They'd never bothered to install newer flicker drives, which meant that the convoy had to move some distance from the planet before jumping out and heading towards Morrison. Viand suspected, despite all the precautions, that the convoy would scatter immediately after the first jump. Civilian drives were never very accurate at the best of times and they were expected to jump in formation…

The communications officer broke into his thoughts. "Commodore, all ships are in formation," he said. "They're ready to depart."

"Take us out," Viand ordered. *That* had been pleasantly quick, compared to the loading. A task that should have taken two days had stretched out to a week, thanks to civilian attitudes to work. Perhaps

they should have offered more money. “Match our speed to the slowest ship in the convoy.”

Dead Hand thrummed quietly as her engines came online, powering her away from the orbital supply dump. Viand fancied that he could feel the cruiser’s indignation at how she’d been treated, first stripped of half of her crew to work at Morrison and then assigned to escorting wallowing freighters from isolated supply dumps to the naval base. *Dead Hand* was designed for raiding enemy star systems, slashing in and launching missiles before pulling out again, hopefully unscratched. She wasn’t meant to be tied down as a convoy escort.

But you kept your ship in working condition, he thought, sourly. Admiral Wachter had complemented him in person. *It was more than most commanders did at Morrison.*

He shook his head in bitter amusement as the display changed, showing the formation. The starships should have moved together, but they were already spreading out. Civilians simply weren’t used to staying in formation and it showed. The heavier freighters seemed to wallow as they picked up speed, their smaller brethren moving ahead as if they were keen to get the whole experience over with. Viand couldn’t blame them, although he knew it would be years before they were allowed to return to civilian life. The warships hadn’t been the only ships at Morrison to be allowed to decay. If anything, the fleet train was in a worse state.

We told ourselves that we didn’t need it, he reminded himself. *We had bases everywhere, allowing us to deploy wherever we wanted. Now… we’ve lost half the bases and we’re screwed.*

“We’re approaching the jump point,” the helmswoman said.

“Slow to all stop,” Viand ordered, tiredly. A naval warship could jump at speed, but a civilian freighter didn’t really have that option. The ship would probably disintegrate mid-jump if it tried. “And check and recheck their calculations.”

He sighed. Minerva lay four light years from Morrison, a single jump for a warship. But for a formation of ancient civilian freighters? Viand had decided on four jumps, one light year apiece. It was playing it very safe, but he didn’t want to lose a single ship. The civilians might have exaggerated the fragility of their ships, yet he didn’t want to find out the hard way.

“Calculations running now,” the helmswoman said. “I…”

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer snapped, as alarms howled. Bright red icons appeared on the display. “Incoming missiles!”

“Bring up the point defence,” Viand snapped. He was shocked, but training rapidly asserted itself. “Clear to open fire; I say again, clear to open fire.”

“Reading five enemy starships,” the tactical officer said. “No; seven!”

Viand stared at the display. Five rebel starships, within four light years of Morrison? They had to have done nothing but travel from Camelot to Morrison since the Battle of Camelot. Or were they other mutineers? It was quite possible that other ships had deserted the Empire, particularly since potential rebels realised they were not alone. He pushed the thought aside as he looked down at the display. His squadron had been caught flatfooted and they were about to pay a terrible price.

“Point defence activating, now,” the tactical officer said. Viand silently blessed his own foresight in holding tactical drills while they were waiting for the freighters to load, even though he had only wanted to keep his crews occupied while the civilians took their sweet time to prepare their ships. “Enemy missiles thirty seconds from impact.”

Viand braced himself as the missiles flashed into the point defence envelope. They’d been taken so completely by surprise that there was little time to prepare a proper defence. He couldn’t help noticing that half of the missiles were targeted on the freighters, rather than the warships. It was an odd tactic, he thought, then he realised what the enemy had in mind. The attackers might want to take the freighters intact, but they knew help would rapidly arrive from Morrison. Instead, they were merely blowing the freighters into flaming debris.

“Got a lock on the enemy ships,” the tactical officer snapped. “Ready to return fire.”

“Return fire,” Viand ordered. The missiles were approaching his ships now, slipping into terminal attack mode. Only a handful had been downed by the point defence. “Fire a full spread and…”

The missiles struck home. *Dead Hand* shuddered, then lost her shields. Viand had only a moment to realise that four missiles had slammed into the hull before their warheads detonated, washing the entire world away in a flare of brilliant white light.

* * *

“Excellent shooting,” Jason Cordova boomed. The entire Imperial Navy squadron had been wiped out before it even managed to fire a single missile back towards its attackers. “Retarget the remaining freighters and continue firing.”

Commander Patrick Jones nodded, watching in disbelief as the freighters tried to scatter. If they’d been destroyers or gunboats, they

might have made it. But they couldn't hope to get out of missile range before it was too late. The second wave of missiles was already closing in rapidly, aiming to destroy rather than cripple. Patrick knew that the raiding squadron would need the supplies, but they didn't want to risk tangling with a fully-alert military force.

He winced as several freighters dropped their puny shields, signalling their surrender. Firing in surrendering vessels was not considered approvable behaviour, but there was no alternative. Several other freighter crews had taken to the lifepods, abandoning their ships. It might keep them alive, he decided, as the second wave of missiles struck home. The remaining freighters disintegrated in balls of radioactive plasma, taking the enemy supplies with them.

"All targets destroyed, sir," the tactical officer reported. She'd been a member of Cordova's crew from the start, someone who hadn't made any bones about being irritated by Patrick's presence. *He'd* only been a mutineer for a year, if that. "The supply dump is scrambling gunboats."

Cordova made a show of stroking his beard. "No need to fight them," he said, "even though we came looking for a fight. Power up the drive, then jump us out to the first waypoint."

Patrick braced himself as he heard the dull whine of the flicker drive powering up. Moments later, his stomach clenched violently and he had to swallow hard to keep from vomiting onto the deck. The compensators weren't properly tuned, he thought, although no one seemed to care enough to fix them. They seemed to regard it as a feature of the ship and her eccentric commander.

"Jump complete, sir," the helmsman reported.

Patrick glanced down at his console. "All ships report a successful disengagement," he reported. Officially, his title was Fleet Coordinator, even though Cordova commanded a large squadron at best. Unofficially, he was charged with keeping an eye on Cordova and his crews. Reputations tended to be tarnished along the Beyond. It was quite possible that Cordova, as well as being an exile, was a pirate. "Missile expenditures…"

"Bureaucratic nonsense," Cordova said, dismissively. He winked at Patrick. "Don't worry about that, son. The commanders can handle their own missile expenditures."

Patrick flushed. Cordova knew perfectly well why Patrick had been assigned to his crew and didn't hesitate to tease him, rather than act offended. Patrick suspected that Cordova was not entirely sane any longer, although there was no way to prove it. Quite a few of the Rim's inhabitants were unstable, particularly after being forced to run for their lives from the Empire's expanding borders. And Cordova, the Imperial Navy CO who'd gone into exile rather than scorch a planet,

could never go home again.

Unless we win, Patrick thought, as he forced himself to relax. *Then we can all go home*.

"Splendid shooting, all of you," Cordova added, addressing the entire crew. "Our targets didn't have a hope."

He was right, of course. The Imperial Navy had been caught completely by surprise, allowing the raiders to fire their missiles at very close range. In future, they'd be harder to surprise, once word of the attack got out. But every ship they detailed to convoy escort and planetary defence was one that couldn't be assigned to blunt the rebel advance,

"Take us to the RV point, then reload our magazines and resume our flight towards Earth," Cordova ordered. "We don't want to get there after they realise we're coming."

He grinned toothily at Patrick, then stood and strode off the bridge, his long frock coat billowing around him. Patrick couldn't help feeling a twinge of admiration, realising just how Cordova had managed to retain the loyalty of most of his crew despite spending so long in the Beyond. But then, the crewmen couldn't go home either. Some of them, from what he'd heard, had found new lives in the Beyond, but others had remained on the cruiser, hoping for a chance for victory.

And they would have remained endlessly flying through space if Admiral Walker hadn't started a rebellion, Patrick thought. His stomach clenched for a second time as *Random Numbers* flickered again, jumping to the RV point. The freighters that made up the fleet train were already waiting for them. *Without us, they would still be in the Beyond*.

"Stand down from alert," the XO ordered, once they had verified the presence of the freighters and exchanged ID codes. Their standards had been tighter than the Imperial Navy's even before the rebellion had begun, Patrick had heard. But then, the Imperial Navy could afford to make mistakes while the Beyonders didn't dare take too many risks. "Alpha crew; take some downtime. Beta crew will supervise the transfers."

Patrick nodded, then stood as his replacement arrived at his console. There was a brief consultation — shift changes on *Random Numbers* were slightly less chaotic than they were on regular starships — and then he left the bridge, passing through the hatch and walking down towards the mess. The cooks, he'd been relieved to discover, were actually quite good, better than the ones on his previous starship. But then, they actually got to control what supplies they received from the logistics officers. Imperial Navy cooks had to make do with what they had.

He took a tray of food and sat down at a table, noting without surprise just how isolated he was from the rest of the crew. They might not suspect the secret part of his mission, but they resented his presence, Cordova didn't take on many new crewmen and he forced those he did to prove themselves before trusting them with responsibility, let alone authority. Patrick, on the other hand, had never had to prove himself. His sole qualification for being a rebel was being caught up in the first set of mutinies, then agreeing to stay with Colin Walker once he had taken control of the ships.

It still astonished him to see how disciplined Cordova's crew actually *was*. They'd been in exile for over twenty years, long enough to lose all cohesion… and yet they hadn't, somehow. They wore makeshift uniforms — like their commander, there was a certain amount of individuality in each uniform — and they comported themselves like proper crewmen, not pirates or even independent shippers. Even the newcomers, the ones Cordova had recruited from the Rim, fitted in nicely. The ship was in excellent condition, no one urinated in the corridors and there was no bullying or molestation of younger crewmen. Patrick had been on Imperial Navy starships with less discipline.

He must have been a great commander, Patrick thought, as he finished his tray. *The Imperial Navy must have been sorry to lose him*.

Or maybe not, he added, in the privacy of his own mind. The qualities that made for a good commanding officer weren't ones that the Imperial Navy always found reassuring. Perhaps they'd felt Cordova had had a personality cult even before he'd deserted the Imperial Navy or perhaps they'd suspected his loyalty. But they wouldn't have assigned a scorching mission to a starship commander they didn't trust. Even hardened sadists were known to balk at wiping an entire planet's population out of existence. The Imperial Navy usually assigned such tasks to officers who had been properly conditioned beforehand, the ones who would obey orders without question, let alone doubts or scruples.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he jumped.

"The Captain wishes to see you in his office," Maze informed him. "You will come with me now."

Patrick nodded. Maze was a towering black woman, her skin pieced with countless pieces of jewellery. There was no mistaking her sheer strength or her loyalty to her commanding officer, even though Patrick would have bet good money that she hadn't been an Imperial Navy officer before Cordova deserted the Navy. Her attitude certainly suggested otherwise.

He stood and allowed Maze to lead him through the ship's corridors and into Officer Country. Unlike an Imperial Navy starship,

the hatch connecting Officer Country to the rest of the ship was unguarded. It wasn't even locked, despite being closed. Patrick wasn't sure quite what to make of it. Was Cordova showing that he trusted his crew or was he making an entirely different statement?

Maze opened the hatch to Cordova's cabin, without bothering to knock. Cordova was seated at his desk, examining a holographic star chart. He glanced up as they entered, then pointed to a seat. Patrick took the seat, then waited. Maze slipped out of the room as quietly as she'd entered, leaving them alone.

Patrick couldn't help looking around the cabin. Cordova didn't seem to be much of a packrat, unlike some Imperial Navy officers he'd known; the bulkheads were largely bare, save for a single photograph placed against one section. It showed a dozen men and women standing together, smiling at the camera. Patrick wondered if they were part of Cordova's graduation class at the academy, but they were all wearing civilian clothes. Remarkably *fine* civilian clothes.

"The attack was a great success," Cordova said. In private, he didn't seem so inclined to project his personality as far as he could. Patrick couldn't help wondering just how much of that personality was actually *real*. For all he knew, Imperial Navy officers were quite different in private. "We smashed the ships without losses."

"Yes, sir," Patrick said. He still disliked the thought of blasting unarmed and surrendering freighters, but there had been no time to take prisoners. "It was a glorious victory."

Cordova eyed him sardonically, then nodded. "We will be moving further towards Earth within the hour," he added. "The real question is where we go from there. Contact will have to be made with the underground. And then…"

He looked up at the star chart. "Where do we go from there?"

Patrick listened as Cordova outlined possibilities. "Earth itself is a possibility; we'd definitely panic the Thousand Bastards if we attacked within the Sol System. God knows it hasn't happened for hundreds of years, even during the First Interstellar War. But that would also encourage them to see to their defences. Colin would not forgive us."

He shrugged. "Wolf 359 is another possibility," he added. "Or Terra Nova. But both of them carry their own risks."

"Wolf 359 is a Class-III shipyard," Patrick pointed out. "If it could be taken intact…"

"I doubt it," Cordova said. "And even if we did, we couldn't hold it. But destroying the facility might be worthwhile."

They talked for nearly an hour, discussing possibilities. In the end, they agreed that Wolf 359 would be an acceptable target, although it would need to be planned carefully. The shipyards were heavily defended even before the rebellion began.

“I meant to ask,” Patrick said, as Cordova poured them both a glass of rotgut. “Why *did* you spare the planet?”

Cordova gave him a sharp glance, as if Patrick had just touched a nerve.

“Because they didn’t deserve to die,” he said, finally. “Because they were sentenced to death, just for existing. And because they didn’t deserve to die.”

Chapter Twenty-One

"You need to wake up," Gaunt snapped. "This base may have been compromised."

Adeeba snapped awake. Thankfully, she'd slept in her clothes. One hand picked up her pistol from where she'd placed it beside her mattress, the other grabbed for her emergency pack and slung it over her shoulder. Frandsen, unsurprisingly, was already awake. The Marine managed to look disgustingly alert, despite the hour.

"Joy," Adeeba muttered. A glance at her watch told her that it was three in the morning. "What happened?"

"Someone probably got caught," Gaunt said. She turned and strode towards the door. "The imps would have made them talk, then killed them. If that person had an inkling of this base's location…"

Adeeba could fill in the rest. The imps had taken longer than she'd expected to realise that there was a coordinated sabotage campaign underway on Earth. but once they'd cottoned on they'd started to tighten security and start hunting for underground bases. Security forces had been sweeping the lower levels, while new procedures had forced underground agents to go silent in the hopes of evading detection. Earth was the one world where the imps couldn't risk excessive brutality, but they seemed mad enough not to care.

Gaunt led them out the door and down a long concrete corridor. Adeeba felt her ears pop as the air pressure changed suddenly, then winced as they reached a solid wall. Gaunt snorted at her and pressed her hand against a certain place. There was a clicking noise and the wall moved out of their way, allowing them to step through into the next section. Inside, there was a long metallic pipe heading into the darkness.

"Take these," Gaunt said, opening a hidden compartment and producing a handful of night-vision goggles. "Do you know how to swim?"

Adeeba blinked in surprise. "Swim?"

"We need to swim further on," Gaunt said. The ground shook, suddenly. "And if you don't know, I suggest you get ready to learn."

"I can swim," Adeeba said. She'd learned at the academy, along with a number of other skills she'd deemed useless in space. "But why…?"

"Officially, this complex ends here," Gaunt said. "Unofficially, there's a link between this one and the next. But only if you can swim."

The ground shook, again. "And they're on their way," she added. "Some of our people are going to sell their lives dearly. I just wish I

was with them now.”

* * *

The lower levels of the city had always given Lieutenant Jackson Robertson the creeps. It was impossible to tell that *humans* had once lived there, not when the area was damp, smelly and largely abandoned. Sure, there were people who eked out an existence in the lower levels, but he couldn’t understand how they could bear to live like that. But their presence provided cover for the underground…

“Sweep carefully,” he ordered, as the Blackshirts led the way into the complex. The charts they’d downloaded before commencing the raid were inaccurate, they’d already discovered the hard way. Someone had been changing the interior of the complex, redesigning it to suit themselves. “And watch out for traps.”

He cursed under his breath as the Blackshirts moved further down the corridor, poking through metal doors and inspecting the hidden rooms. Blackshirts were brave, no one doubted that, but they were also hard to control once they got the scent of blood. Jackson would have preferred more disciplined troopers; his superiors had told him, when he’d asked, that there were none available. He would just have to hope that the Blackshirts obeyed orders during the raid and took prisoners, rather than slaughtering everyone they encountered who wasn’t wearing a uniform.

The rooms looked to have been abandoned a long time ago, he realised. Anything that might have been decomposable had already decomposed. It didn’t *look* as if anyone had been down in the complex for decades, perhaps hundreds of years. But the sniffers were reporting the presence of human DNA traces, suggesting that the rebels might have established a base further down…

There was a click, loud enough to be heard over the communications network, then a colossal explosion. The three Blackshirts who had taken point were blown backwards, their armoured bodies tossed out of the passageway like ragdolls. Their successors opened fire, raking the burning corridor with bursts of plasma fire. As far as Jackson could tell, there was nothing there now the IED had detonated, but they were trained and conditioned to respond to any provocation with maximum force. It helped deter future attacks, their conditioners had claimed. Jackson had his doubts.

“Cease fire,” he snapped, angrily. He didn’t manage to keep the anger out of his voice. “Hold your fucking fire!”

The Blackshirts slowly stopped firing. Their shots had left the corridor scorched and pitted, but otherwise undamaged. Jackson

muttered another curse under his breath, then detailed the Blackshirts to start advancing forward again, carefully. The first IED probably wouldn't be the last and, unlike operating in the open, the corridors ensured that the Blackshirts would follow a predicable course. It would be easy for the underground to mine all the approaches to the complex.

A second explosion blasted out ahead of him as the Blackshirts stumbled over another IED. This time, no one was hurt. Jackson let out a sigh of relief as they broke into the complex and looked around. It seemed deserted, but closer inspection revealed that someone had definitely been in the complex not too long ago. There was almost no dust on the floor. In fact, he decided, the signs suggested that there had been quite a few people in the complex.

"This seems to have been an operating base," he said, keying his radio. If something happened to the advance teams, their commanders would know that a rebel base had been uncovered. By now, every exit route should have been firmly secured. Either the rebels had abandoned the base… or they were frantically preparing to make a last stand. "So far, all we have encountered is traps, but there might be live rebels further down."

"Understood," his CO said. "If you can take some rebels alive, Jackson, there will be a promotion in it for you."

Jackson nodded, then directed the Blackshirts to fan out. It was time to search the entire complex piece by piece. And if they found the rebels… they'd give them a nasty surprise.

* * *

Adeeba gritted her teeth as they came out of the pipe and found themselves looking at a vast reservoir. Once, she recalled, the city's water supply would have been drawn from this huge tank of water, then pumped up through a network of pipes and then recycled after use. Now, the tank had been walled over and forgotten by the city's officials. The only source of illumination was a faint glow from high overhead. She caught a glimpse of something moving under the water and wondered, suddenly, if entirely new forms of life had had time to evolve. Or if the rebels, trying to ensure a secure food supply, had introduced fish into the tank.

"Here," Gaunt said, passing her a breathing mask. "Stick your shoes in the bag, then put the mask on and get ready to swim."

Frandsen scowled. "Where are we going?"

Gaunt gave him a brilliant grin, her teeth shining in the semi-darkness. "There's a passageway under the water," she informed him.

“We can use it to get out.”

She checked Adeeba’s mask, then smiled. “You have two hours worth of air in the mask,” she added. “If we don’t get out by then, they’ll never find our bodies.”

Frandsen gave her a reassuring look as Gaunt turned and jumped into the water. There was a loud splash — deafeningly loud in the silent compartment — and then Gaunt surfaced, waving at them to follow her. Adeeba hesitated, standing on the edge of the water, then felt a push on her back. She tilted and plummeted into the water. It was cold, cold enough to make her shiver; her clothes suddenly felt very heavy. Frandsen joined her a moment later, then nodded to Gaunt. The underground fighter dived under the water and vanished.

Adeeba took a breath, even though she knew the mask should take care of her, then followed. It was hard to see Gaunt in the gloom; tiny fish swam nearby, confusing her. Dark shapes appeared as she swam deeper, some of them unrecognisable and others familiar enough for her imagination to fill in the details. She couldn’t help shivering again as Gaunt led her towards a pipe, then dived right inside. Adeeba hesitated — she was no claustrophobe, but the pipe seemed too small for anything human — and then followed Gaunt, trying not to think about where she was.

It felt like hours before they finally came out of the pipe. The darkness pressed around her like a living thing; it was a relief when they saw glimmers of light in the distance. Gaunt swam upwards as soon as they reached the end; Adeeba followed her, gasping as her head broke the surface. They seemed to have come out in a giant swimming pool, although it looked as disused as the reservoir. But there were working lights in the ceiling…

“Get out of the water,” Gaunt ordered, as she clambered up the ladder and out of the pool. “We’ll need to dry ourselves, then run for it.”

“Understood,” Adeeba said. The whole experience seemed to have become a nightmare. She would sooner have been on a starship hulk than go swimming through the pipes again. “Where are we?”

“This used to be a famous resort,” Gaunt said. “That was centuries ago, of course.”

“Of course,” Adeeba agreed.

* * *

Jackson was starting to think that the rebels had definitely abandoned the complex before the Blackshirts had arrived. Apart from a handful of IEDs, they’d found no one — and nothing that they could

use to find other rebel bases. Indeed, it looked as though the underground had been very careful to strip out anything that could be used to locate other bases. They were normally careful, but there was usually *something*. This time, there was nothing.

"There are forensic teams on the way," his CO said. He'd been logging onto the command network and nagging for results, then logging off before Jackson could work up the nerve to point out that nagging him wasn't exactly productive. "Secure the complex, then clear the way for them."

"Understood," Jackson said. He checked his HUD — the Blackshirts had swept the entire complex — then nodded. "We'll wait for them here."

He couldn't help wondering just what the underground had been thinking. Sure, life on Earth wasn't good, but they could easily emigrate to another planet. There were colony missions departing all the time. Or they could get proper jobs. Jackson himself hadn't whined about unfairness when he'd finally grown old enough to seek employment, he'd gone out and looked for work. And when they'd decided that he was suited to be a Blackshirt supervising officer, he'd been certain of a good career. There was no reason the underground couldn't do the same.

Probably they prefer to whine instead of actually doing something to improve their lives, Jackson thought, as the Blackshirts returned to the centre of the complex. It had been certified IED-free after a quick check. *Or knock us down rather than build themselves up…*

There was a dull rumble in the distance. Jackson blinked in surprise, wondering if someone had discovered another IED, then frowned as he realised that the rumbling was actually getting *closer*. Had the bastards managed to collapse the ceiling? It was solid, according to the briefing; the city's designers had made it's foundations out of the strongest material they'd had at the time. It would take a nuke to do real damage…

And then he saw the water, rushing through the corridors and coming right at him.

There was no time to sound the alert or to grab hold of something solid. The water struck with the force of a tidal wave, picking him up and effortlessly slamming him against the far wall. He heard his armour crack, the impact stunning him; moments later, he felt cold water drifting up his body and into his mask. There was another crash…

And then there was nothing. Nothing, but darkness.

* * *

“There was an ancient water storage chamber down there,” the security officer explained, reluctantly. “They must have had it mined, ready to explode. Once the Blackshirts relaxed, the underground triggered the explosives and dumped a few thousand tons of water into the complex. Any clues left behind will be gone now.”

“Along with several thousand Blackshirts,” Tiberius said. He’d watched through the network as the Blackshirts invested the rebel base. By the time the water had reached its zenith, most of the investing forces had been drowned. “This will cause interesting problems for us, won’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” the security officer said.

Tiberius masked his reaction with an effort. The underground had not only pulled off a successful campaign, they’d managed to lure a vast number of Blackshirts into a trap — or at least that was how they were certain to explain it. They might have been inconvenienced, but the Blackshirts had taken a bloody nose. It was quite likely that the underground would get thousands of new recruits on Earth — and probably hundreds more off-world. The sabotage campaign had already spread to Mars, Titan and Io. How bad could it get in future?

He disconnected from the network, then looked at the report from Admiral Foster. The aged Admiral was trying, at least, to clean out the corruption in Home Fleet. But it wasn’t an easy task when telling the difference between patronage and outright corruption was difficult. And, unlike Admiral Wachter, Admiral Foster’s victims had the Families Council on Earth to complain to. Their patrons had to intervene on their behalf.

We need a unified front, Tiberius thought. *If we all made the same response, the clients would behave themselves. We could move them to safer places and keep them out of the front line.*

But it was the age-old problem. A patron had to support his client or the client would take his services elsewhere. Tiberius’s assistants had told him that they’d received several offers from senior officers who felt betrayed by their former patrons. It would have been a good time to expand his own networks if he hadn’t been more worried about the state of Home Fleet. By his most optimistic calculations, the rebels were three months away. If they realised just how weak Home Fleet was, they might bypass Morrison altogether and strike directly at Earth. They might win the war easily.

Admiral Foster had proposed swapping one of his superdreadnaught squadrons for one of Admiral Wachter’s squadrons. Reading between the lines, Tiberius suspected he meant that he intended to give Admiral Wachter the task of reassigning or relieving the corrupt officers while taking advantage of Admiral Wachter’s purge. In theory, it wasn’t a problem; in practice, it was likely to pose

a major headache. What if Admiral Wachter objected to losing a squadron he had trained into something resembling acceptable condition?

"Damn it," Tiberius swore, out loud. He picked up the datapad in frustration and threw it across the room, aiming at the portrait of a nobleman with an impossibly firm jaw. It missed, slamming against the wall and crashing to the floor. "Damn it all!"

Sharon stepped inside, one eyebrow raised. "Are you all right, My Lord?"

"Just… *frustrated*," Tiberius said. "Why is it that every time we find a solution to one problem it brings another couple of problems in its wake?"

"There is no such thing as a perfect solution," Sharon said. "And people tend to react to what you do."

Tiberius placed his head in his hands. Morrison needed to be prepared for war, so they'd appointed someone with an unprecedented amount of authority — and now they had to worry about his reaction to their decisions. Home Fleet needed to be prepared for war — and now they had to be careful how they treated their clients, for fear of rebellion or even just accidentally destroying the patronage networks. Earth needed to be secured against the underground — and now everything had slowed down to allow security checks to take place, just when they needed to ramp up industrial production. And they had to clean out corruption… while knowing the officers they needed to keep were also the ones they needed to remove.

"It's too much," he said, bitterly. "Is there any way we can actually *win*?"

"Admiral Wachter might pull off a victory," Sharon pointed out. "And besides, just how badly has the underground hurt you?"

Tiberius considered it. They'd been hurt — but they'd been embarrassed more than hurt. All of the major families had been targeted, which made it harder for them to point fingers at Tiberius in particular…

He shook his head. Normally, they could just pick up the pieces and rebuild. But now they had to do several things at once, in the midst of a war. He had no idea how the Empire had managed to do it during the First Interstellar War. But then, the Empire had been new then, barely established. It had taken years for the rot to set in.

But he had to deal with the rot.

"Badly enough," he said. "Perhaps we should offer more colony incentives."

"Perhaps you should relax," Sharon said. "You're taking too much on yourself."

"And if I rely on others, they'll try to steal the family out from

under me," Tiberius countered. He shook his head. "Call a pleasure slave, then hold my calls. I'll try to relax for an hour."

But he knew, no matter how much he tried to forget, reality wouldn't go away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"The combat drill was a success, Commodore."

Commodore Sahrye Yamani nodded. The battlecruiser squadron had only been *hers* for a month, following Admiral Wachter's decision to remove the squadron's former commander for gross incompetence, neglect and corruption. Sahrye hadn't expected her promotion — she had no senior patron — but she didn't intend to let the Admiral down. Besides, he'd told her that she would keep the squadron if she did well.

"Get me the full results," she ordered. "And single out the gunnery crews that performed well."

She smiled. If there was any advantage to lurking in interstellar space, three light years from the nearest inhabited world, it was the chance to drill her ships without the Admiral looking over her shoulder. The squadron had performed dreadfully in the first live-fire exercises held at Morrison, but Sahrye intended to ensure that next time would be different. They might do well enough to ensure that their crews weren't reshuffled again by the Admiral.

The thought dampened her mood as she scanned the reports. She hadn't been a very good Captain, she had to admit; she'd allowed her ship's standards to decay badly. Indeed, if there had been a potential replacement, she suspected she would have joined the squadron's former Commodore on Morrison, cooling her heels as she waited for judgement. And, without the patronage that her former CO had enjoyed, it was unlikely she would ever see command again.

But Admiral Wachter had given her a chance. She didn't intend to waste it.

"Not too bad," she decided, after she had finished. Targeting accuracy had improved remarkably, after two officers had been summarily demoted and a third had been escorted off the ship in chains. He'd been running a bullying ring that had forced crewmen to turn half their salaries to him… and Sahrye hadn't even noticed. "We should be able to do better in the next fleet exercise."

"Yes, Commodore," her XO agreed. Sahrye was in the position of having to both command her ship and the entire squadron, if only because her former XO had been ordered to take command of another battlecruiser. Her crew weren't quite used to it yet. "Missile reloading was only simulated, but reloading rates were improved too."

"Let us hope they work that way in real life," Sahrye said. She'd concentrated too much on simulations, which were never entirely exact. "In fact…"

She paused as a console chimed. "Commodore, a courier has just

arrived from Parallax," the communications officer said. "They're under attack."

"The Admiral called it," Sahrye said. He'd noted that Parallax would almost certainly be targeted as the rebel juggernaut made its way towards Morrison. "Sound battlestations, then power up the flicker drive. It's time to go to war."

* * *

Parallax was an odd system, by anyone definition. It was a binary star system, with a small rocky planet that sat precisely at the barycentre between the two stars. According to the report Colin had scanned while planning the offensive, the corporation that owned the system had speculated that the planet had actually been moved into place by an alien race, although there was apparently no real evidence. Reading between the lines, Colin suspected that the whole story had been concocted to secure additional funding from the Empire. Rumours of advanced alien technology were sure to interest potential investors.

"I'm picking up no sign of anything larger than a gunboat," the sensor officer said. "They're scrambling now."

Colin nodded, thoughtfully. Parallax was a corporate industrial node and starship repair yard, little else. There was no point in fighting for the world, not when there were more valuable targets in the Empire. He certainly didn't intend to occupy it, not when the system couldn't be held indefinitely. All he wanted to do was destroy the facilities and pull out.

"Transmit a demand that they evacuate their orbital facilities," he ordered. "And tell them that we will leave their installations on the ground intact if the orbital stations are evacuated without a fight."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer said.

Colin watched grimly as the superdreadnaughts moved closer to their targets. The gunboats had to know they were no match for his fleet, so why were they trying to fight? Did they intend to place honour before reason — or did they think they were dead anyway? Parallax wasn't an Earth-like world. If Colin broke his word and bombarded the facilities, anyone who survived the bombardment would suffocate when their suits ran out of air.

"Gunboats entering missile range in twenty seconds," the tactical officer reported.

"Prepare to fire," Colin ordered. He silently cursed the gunboat commanders under his breath. They had about as much hope against his fleet as a snowball had in hell, but they were still preparing to

fight anyway. “I want them swept away with the first volley…”

“*Intrusion*,” the sensor officer snapped. “*Multiple* contacts, flickering in right on top of us!”

Colin fought down the urge to swear. They’d walked right into a trap. The enemy had guessed their target — or one of their targets — and prepared an ambush. He watched as the display solidified, revealing a squadron of Imperial Navy battlecruisers. Hardly a threat to his force, but powerful enough to do some damage before they were destroyed.

“Bring us about,” he ordered, as the battlecruisers advanced towards his fleet. They’d jumped in at high speed; their crews had to be vomiting on the decks by now. “Lock missiles on target, prepare to fire as soon as they enter range.”

* * *

Sahrye winced in pain. Her stomach hurt; she’d dry-heaved violently as soon as they’d come out of the jump. Some of her crew had been even less lucky, according to the reports; they’d been stunned by the jump and had to be transported to sickbay. Two of her bridge crew had even fainted. Silently, she blessed her foresight in having their reliefs standing by. She’d anticipated the dangers of jumping at such high speed.

“One superdreadnaught squadron, thirty-seven smaller ships,” the sensor officer said. Her voice sounded raspy, but she’d managed to stay at her post. “I can’t pick up any cloaked ships.”

Sahrye understood her puzzlement. The rebels had more than one superdreadnaught squadron under their command, so where were the others? But then, no one would have anticipated needing more than one squadron to smash the installations orbiting Parallax. Hell, one squadron was overkill. The remainder of the rebel fleet might be hitting other worlds right now…

She pushed the nagging worry aside. “Lock weapons on target,” she croaked. Her throat hurt when she tried to speak, but she forced herself to get the words out. “Prepare to fire.”

They hadn’t pulled the jump off perfectly, but no one ever did outside simulations. They’d materialised just outside missile range, on an angle that would bring them into missile range quickly without actually heading directly into the teeth of enemy fire. Sahrye loved her battlecruisers, but she had no illusions about how long they would last if it came down to a direct missile exchange with a squadron of superdreadnaughts. And if they closed to energy range they’d be atomised within seconds.

“Entering missile range now,” the tactical officer reported. He sounded perfectly fine, damn him. “Commodore?”

“Fire at will,” Sahrye ordered. “All ships, fire at will.”

The battlecruiser shuddered as she emptied her external racks, followed by a massive broadside from her port missile tubes. Moments later, the ship flipped over and fired a second broadside from her starboard tubes. Sahrye watched, grimly, as missiles roared towards their targets, the two closest enemy superdreadnaughts. They might not be enough to actually *damage* their targets, but they’d sure as hell know they’d been kissed.

“Enemy ships are returning fire,” the tactical officer said.

Sahrye gritted her teeth. Each superdreadnaught mounted more internal tubes than her entire squadron and they’d spat out enough missiles to wipe her ships out several times over. They weren’t happy to be ambushed, she guessed. Thankfully, the Admiral wasn’t expecting her to produce a victory, merely give the rebels a fright. And they’d definitely succeeded at that!

“Angle us away from them and launch decoys,” she ordered. They had no business being anywhere near such firepower. “And flicker us out the moment the drive has recharged. Don’t wait for orders, just do it.”

“Aye, Captain,” the tactical officer said.

* * *

“Reorder the formation,” Colin ordered. “Move the smaller ships up to block the enemy missiles.”

He watched, as dispassionately as he could, as the missile swarm bore down on his ships. By chance or careful planning, the loyalists had gotten the drop on him — and if they’d brought another superdreadnaught squadron or two along, it might well have proven disastrous. As it was, he had a chance to test his new point defence doctrine before encountering the Morrison Fleet.

The point defence network went active the moment the missiles entered engagement range, tracking each and every missile and assigning it a priority. Thankfully, this particular group of loyalists hadn’t thought of trying to strip away his smaller ships *first* — but then, they didn’t have the firepower to stand and fight. Instead, his smaller ships concentrated on protecting their larger cousins instead of protecting themselves. One by one, the missiles flickered and vanished from the display.

“No noticeable improvements to their seeker heads,” the tactical officer commented. There was no point in trying to control the point

defence directly. No human mind could hope to handle it in time to make a difference. It required electronic reflexes to pick off all of the missiles. “Their ECM doesn’t seem to have been improved either.”

Colin nodded. The Geeks and Nerds might be the most inventive people in the galaxy, but the Empire wasn’t entirely devoid of innovative thinkers. And, if they *did* come up with something new for their warheads, they had the industrial facilities to put them into mass production at terrifying speed. Even now, despite all the damage the rebels had inflicted, the Empire still maintained a colossal production advantage. A long war would almost certainly be a lost war.

Unless the Geeks come up with a game-breaker, he thought. But it was hard to imagine what that might be. *And manage to produce it in sufficient quantities to make a difference.*

The superdreadnaught shuddered once as a missile expended itself against the ship’s shields, without inflicting any damage. Colin allowed himself a moment of relief, then watched as his missiles closed in on the enemy fleet. The enemy CO had been lucky or very good, he realised a moment later, as the ships flickered out of the system. They’d got in, launched their missiles and jumped out again without losses. Colin nodded in silent respect, then turned his attention to the gunboats. They had closed to energy range, launching a small handful of missiles towards their targets. One by one, they were picked off by the point defence.

“Repeat our demand for them to abandon the orbital facilities,” Colin ordered. “And inform them that they have five minutes to comply.”

“Aye, sir,” the communications officer said.

Colin thought rapidly as the timer started to count down. The enemy attack seemed pointless, but it would cost him a great deal of effort to recover the missiles — perhaps more, if they couldn’t recover them before enemy reinforcements arrived. By Colin’s most pessimistic calculations, it was still unlikely that the enemy commander would send superdreadnaughts away from Morrison, but the battlecruiser ambush had been a nasty shock. It suggested that the enemy CO was willing and able to gamble with his ships.

It is the only way to win, Colin told himself. *They can’t win a war without fighting.*

But it was out of character for any of the senior officers he’d met. They’d all preferred bludgeons to rapiers, the application of overwhelming force instead of subtle tactics. After all, losing an expensive starship could mean being blamed for the loss, even if it had been necessary. And yet… whoever had taken command at Morrison had shown himself willing to risk losses — heavy losses — if it slowed the rebels down. It was worrying.

“Sir,” the tactical officer said, “request permission to start deploying recovery teams.”

“Granted,” Colin said. He glanced at the timer. There were two minutes left before the time he’d given the enemy ran out. “And open fire on the platforms as soon as the timer reaches zero.”

The system CO had evidently had enough of heroics. Instead of trying to fight, the platforms were swiftly evacuated and left abandoned. There weren’t even any point defences to provide cover, as pitiful as it would have been. Colin’s missiles slammed into their hulls, vaporising them one by one. Debris tumbled through space and dropped into the atmosphere of the planet below. Colin wondered, absently, if any of the pieces would hit the facilities on the ground.

Billions of credits worth of investment, he thought. It was pitiful compared to the sheer size of the Empire, but every little loss would mount up. Eventually, the Empire would be literally unable to pay its defenders, let alone meet its other obligations. By then, it would just fragment, no matter what happened to the rebellion. *All smashed to rubble.*

“All platforms destroyed, sir,” the tactical officer reported.

Colin sat back in his command chair and watched, grimly, as the missiles were recovered and towed to ammunition ships. The enemy could have planned it that way, intending to catch his forces in the act of recovering their missiles. If they turned up with enough force, he would have to bug out, leaving some of his people behind to be killed — or taken prisoner. But, as the seconds slipped away, nothing materialised. The enemy CO didn’t seem to care enough about Parallax to send superdreadnaughts, even with the prospect of catching Colin with his pants down.

There have to be limits to his freedom of operation, Colin told himself. *The Thousand Families wouldn’t have given him complete authority…*

But who the hell was he facing?

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said. “The missile crews have recovered the last of the missiles.”

“Jump us out as soon as everyone is back onboard,” Colin ordered. “And then set course for the final RV point.”

He forced himself to consider his overall plan. By now, the recon ships would be probing Morrison, studying the defences. It would, he hoped, give him an idea how to tackle the Morrison Fleet. Perhaps they would even pick up something that would identify their mystery opponent.

We’ll meet up at the RV point, he thought. *And then we plan our offensive.*

He looked down at the console, thinking hard. Few historical

battles, even during the height of the First Interstellar War, could be considered decisive. No matter the winners or losers, the wars had been fought out on such a scale that no battle had truly settled the issue. But now… if the rebels suffered major losses at Morrison it could be disastrous. Unlike the Dathi, they were in no shape to replace their losses and wouldn't be for years to come.

Whatever happens at Morrison, he told himself, once again, *will decide the fate of the war*.

* * *

"All ships have checked in, Commodore," the communications officer said. "No major damage, certainly nothing inflicted by the enemy. *Fury* suffered a drive node glitch that will need replacing, but her drive field remained intact."

Lucky for her, Sahrye thought. If the battlecruiser *had* suffered a drive failure in the midst of combat, the results would have been disastrous. She would have been overwhelmed and blown to atoms before her flicker drive could have yanked her out of the battle. Even so, they'd given the rebels a nasty fright and confirmed — as if they hadn't already known — that the rebels were moving towards Morrison.

"All ships preformed well," she said. They'd had luck on their side too, as well as good judgement and intensive training. Once they realised that they'd pulled off a victory, of sorts, crew morale would skyrocket. "Set course for Morrison. More sedately, this time."

The helmsman blinked in surprise. "Commodore?"

"Set course for Morrison," Sahrye repeated, calmly. She wasn't used to repeating herself, but she understood the man's surprise. Their orders were to harass the rebels, not to make one attack and then fall back. "I want to get there before the rebels."

She contemplated vectors in her mind. It was a week to Morrison, assuming that the flicker drives held out. Irritatingly, the drive itself provided instant transport — or as close to instant as made no difference — but recharging the drive took time, while making several jumps in a row put a strain on the system. And, if they happened to need to replace the drive motivator nodes in transit, the time it took to reach their destination would increase rather steeply.

The rebels would probably take it gently, she told herself. They couldn't afford to lose starships, not now. Morrison was armed to the teeth and, thanks to the Admiral, the Morrison Fleet was slowly recovering from years of neglect. The rebels would have to assume that the fleet was in tip-top condition…

They'll go after Morrison with everything they can bring to bear against the world, she told herself. *We have to be there to help.*

"Course set," the helmsman said. "All ships report ready to jump."

Sahrye rubbed her chest, feeling ghostly pains in her body. The report from sickbay stated that forty-two crewmen had been overwhelmed by flicker shock. It was rare to see so many cases on one ship, but few of them had actually taken part in a combat jump, certainly not one of such violence. But it had paid off for the squadron. They'd surprised the enemy and achieved their objective, then withdrawn without loss. Compared to the beatings the rebels had handed out, time and time again, she'd won a major victory.

"Take us back to Morrison," she ordered, quietly.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"You appear to have not made many improvements," Admiral Wachter commented. "Dare I ask what you actually *did*?"

Penny watched with some amusement as Captain Solomon cringed under the Admiral's cold gaze. The superdreadnaught *General Sugiyama* had been inspected two weeks ago, whereupon it had been discovered that the ship was in a pitiful state. Admiral Wachter had angrily berated Captain Solomon, reminded him of his combat record, then told him that he had two weeks to fix the damage. The inspection tour had revealed that hardly anything had actually been done.

"Let me help," Wachter said, when the Captain said nothing. "You should have replaced the entire tactical system — but you haven't. You should have checked the missiles you have in storage and replaced them if they were found to have decayed — but you haven't. You should have resorted your crew, removed the worst of the bullies and appointed new supervisors — but you haven't. Why, exactly, did you decide to leave your shop in the same crappy state it was when I first had it inspected?"

The Captain swallowed, then stood upright. "I have patrons…"

Wachter lifted a single eyebrow. "And your patrons told you to delay matters?"

"They said I had to do it," Captain Solomon insisted. "I don't know why…"

"I can guess," Wachter said. He met the Captain's eyes. "Let's consider this, shall we? The rebels cannot be more than a month away — and they're probably quite a bit closer. We have to get as many superdreadnaughts as possible into fighting trim before they arrive. And then your patrons give you orders to delay the repair work? What do you think they have in mind?"

He pressed on before the Captain could answer. "It doesn't matter what they have in mind," he said. "I think they're committing treason by trying to slow down the repair work. If the rebels smash the fleet here, it will be years before we can take the offensive even if Home Fleet successfully defends Earth. And you, *Captain*, were considered expendable. They knew I wouldn't leave you in command."

Penny kept her face expressionless. She knew what it was like to be a client — and to be caught between common sense and orders from one's superiors. But Admiral Wachter was right. They needed every last superdreadnaught ready for action as soon as possible — and orders to delay matters simply made no sense. And yet… Captain Solomon had known that defying his patrons would have cost him his career, if they were feeling forgiving. Patrons could never risk

showing weakness, for fear that their other clients would desert them,

"You are relieved of command," Wachter said, addressing Solomon. He nodded to the four Marines he'd brought with him. "These gentlemen will escort you to the holding camp on Morrison, where you can write me a *full* explanation of what you were ordered to do and just why you thought you should do it. Maybe, just maybe, I can find you a post less challenging, one where your patrons will leave you alone."

He watched as the Marines hauled the protesting Solomon off his bridge, then looked around for the ship's XO. "Commander Hastings?"

The younger man stood up, eying the Admiral nervously. Penny hastily scanned his file and winced, inwardly. Hastings was far too young for his rank. A quick check revealed that he was a lower scion of a lower family. Somehow, she wasn't surprised, although she knew it could be a bad omen. Percival had come from similar origins and he'd grown into an utterly incompetent monster.

"You are promoted to Captain," Wachter said, "and placed in command of this ship. I will assign you a competent XO and a cadre of maintenance crewmen within the day. You are ordered to get this ship up and running at acceptable levels within two weeks. Failure to do so will cost you your rank. Do you understand me?"

Hastings nodded. He looked confident, although Penny couldn't tell if he genuinely believed he could handle it or he was simply recklessly overconfident. She told herself it was probably the latter. Aristocrats were rarely placed in positions where they could *fail*.

"I suggest you listen to the experienced newcomers," Wachter added. "They do know what they're talking about, *Captain*."

He turned and strode through the hatch, heading back down towards the shuttlebay. Penny saluted Captain Hastings quickly, then followed. The ship's bulkheads were covered in fancy artwork, some of them downright erotic. Penny was no expert in art, but she had a feeling that most of them were original works — and that Captain Solomon had spent most of his ship's discretionary budget on decoration. Percival had done the same, years ago.

"They wanted to encourage more aristocrats to take up command posts," Wachter commented, when she said that out loud. "There had to be some incentives *beyond* the prospect of having one's body blown to atoms if war actually did break out. So they came up with the idea that officers could decorate their ships to suit themselves, at least as long as the ships were still combat-worthy. Somewhere along the line they forgot about keeping the ships ready to fight."

Penny nodded in understanding. No one in their right mind would have appointed Percival to command a squadron, let alone a whole sector, if they'd genuinely expected trouble. But then, there had

been no reason to *expect* trouble, at least not in foresight. Hindsight, on the other hand, showed that the Empire had underestimated the ingenuity of some of its junior crewmen. And then there had been quite a few commanding officers on Morrison who had never left the pleasure dens, even to board the starships they nominally commanded.

She followed him into the shuttle and took a seat. Unlike Percival, Wachter seemed content with a simple transport shuttle, one that might be used for moving crewmen from one ship to another. The pilot powered up the drives and took them out into space as Penny accessed the fleet-wide datanet through the shuttle's systems and asked for an update. They would have been alerted at once if the rebels had attacked, but everything else had been put on hold.

"Admiral," she said, as a report blinked up in front of her, "a freighter arrived from Tyson."

Wachter frowned. "Tyson?"

Penny scanned the report, then passed him the datapad. "The rebels attacked," she said, shortly. "And most of our crewmen decided to come back here."

"And the rebels could be on their heels," Wachter said, thoughtfully. He read the report, then called out to the pilot. "Take us to Station Nine."

"Aye, sir," the pilot said. The shuttle hummed louder as it altered course. "Station Nine in twelve minutes."

Penny gave Wachter a puzzled look. "Station Nine?"

"Imperial Intelligence has the returnees in its grubby hands," Wachter said, grimly. "I want to get *my* hands on them before they do something stupid."

"…Shit," Penny said.

Only a handful of officers and crewmen had chosen to return to the Empire, even though the rebels were quite decent about returning those who wanted to return. Penny knew what had happened to most of the returnees, though; they'd been interrogated brutally, then shipped to the nearest penal world. Stacy Roosevelt had been the only real exception — and no one knew what had happened to her after the Fall of Camelot. But then, she'd been aristocracy. The others had had no such protections.

"Call the Marines, too," Wachter added. "Imperial Intelligence might try something stupid."

Penny felt her head throbbing in sympathy as they approached the colossal space station. As the sector capital, as well as a colossal naval base, Morrison rated a full Imperial Intelligence detachment, including a station that was nominally independent from the Imperial Navy. The Navy had never put pressure on the intelligence officers, at

least prior to Wachter's arrival, if only because they had been seen as a separate organisation. Wachter, on the other hand, expected workable intelligence within a useful timeframe.

She clenched her teeth together as the shuttle docked at the airlock. They hadn't been allowed access to the station's shuttlebay, although she wasn't sure if the shuttlebay was occupied or if it were a calculated insult. But Wachter probably wouldn't care, she knew; he never seemed to pay much attention to formality, let alone the complex greeting rites for when one senior officer visited another. Her body started to tremble, but she held it under control by sheer force of will. She would not let her treatment at the hands of Imperial Intelligence render her useless, not now.

Wachter stood up and led the way through the hatch. Penny followed him, mentally clenching and unclenching her hands. Outside, two men wearing civilian clothes waited for them. There was something odd about their outfits, but it took Penny several moments to understand what she was seeing. From a distance, or through civilian eyes, they looked almost *military*. And yet the outfits were still definitely civilian.

"Take me to Director Smyth," Wachter ordered. "Now."

The two men blinked in surprise. Imperial Intelligence had a *lot* of influence. They were probably more used to men genuflecting in front of them than barking orders. After a moment, one of them nodded and led the way down the long corridor. The other fell in behind them, bringing up the rear. Penny met his eyes for a moment and shivered, inwardly, at the coldness in his gaze. It was impossible to tell if he'd been conditioned or if he was really that cold, but the sight chilled her to the bone.

Director Smyth was a tall, inhumanly thin man with a pinched face and receding hairline. He looked faintly sinister to Penny, although that could have just been her imagination. The Director was standing in front of a set of monitor screens, each one showing a different person in an interrogation cell. If her experience was anything to go by, Penny realised, they hadn't yet started work. The detainees were being given time to imagine what lay ahead of them.

"Admiral," Smyth said. His voice was as cold as his eyes. "What can we do for you?"

"You can start by explaining why you moved the returnees to this complex," Wachter said. "I issued specific orders that I was to be informed when someone — anyone — returned from rebel captivity."

Smyth smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. "Imperial Intelligence has standing orders to take anyone who has spent time in captivity into custody as soon as possible," he said. "In this case, they have to be checked for conditioning and then sent to Earth for further

interrogation."

"There wasn't time for them to be conditioned," Wachter snapped. He'd reviewed the entire file on the flight. "And they chose to come back to us."

"They also lost a battle against the rebels," Smyth pointed out. "There are standing orders for defeatist officers *also* to be returned to Earth."

"That has yet to be established," Wachter said, coldly. "And executing officers who suffer defeat through no fault of their own is *not* helpful for morale."

"My duty is ensuring that defeatism doesn't spread," Smyth said. "We already have too many whispers of trouble running through the sector. Defeatism will defeat us as surely as rebel missiles."

"So will convincing officers and men that they won't survive their superiors if they lose battles," Wachter said. "The proper procedure for handling a defeat is to examine the sensor records, hold an inquest and *then* decide if a court-martial is merited. That does *not* included snatching naval personnel without due cause, threatening them with a full-spectrum interrogation and then…"

"I have authority from Imperial Intelligence to do whatever it takes to provide intelligence," Smyth interrupted. "These…. *returnees* have to be interrogated so we can learn what they know."

"The rebels wouldn't have let them see anything we could use tactically," Wachter said. He met Smyth's eyes. "Tell me, Director. What sort of message do you think you're sending to the officers and crew here? At Morrison?"

Smyth glared at him. "That Imperial Intelligence is doing its duty?"

"No," Wachter said. He took a step forward. "That they cannot expect mercy, if they are captured and then choose to return. That there is no point in remaining loyal to the Empire if captured, because if they survive the rebels they sure as hell won't survive Imperial Intelligence. That they will be made the scapegoats for each and every defeat…"

He took another step forward. "I have spent the past few months trying desperately to shore up morale, hoping and praying that it is enough to prevent a mutiny when the rebels finally arrive," he added. "I have removed bad or corrupt commanding officers. I have sorted out pay which was often months overdue. I have promoted or otherwise rewarded officers and crewmen who showed genuine promise at anything other than ass-kissing. And I will not allow you to jeopardize all that just because you think these people" — he waved a hand at the monitors — "might know something you can use to make yourself look impressive.

Penny stared at him. No one, absolutely no one, stood up to Imperial Intelligence. Even Percival, for all of his contacts and patrons, had trod carefully around the spooks. Everyone knew that being targeted by the intelligence officers could ruin a career, even if one happened to be completely innocent. But Wachter… Wachter didn't seem to care.

"There are two ways this can go," Wachter added, in a voice as cold and deadly as interstellar space. "You can decide that they are innocent of all charges and release them into my custody… or the Marines will storm the station, liberate them and arrest your people on charges of impeding the war effort. Because I will *not* tolerate such stupidity."

"We are not under your command," Smyth hissed. "Imperial Intelligence doesn't answer to you."

"I have authority directly from the Families Council," Wachter countered. "Do you answer to *them*?"

Smyth hesitated, suddenly very aware of the dangerous waters surrounding him. Penny felt a moment of sympathy, which rapidly faded away as she recalled what Imperial Intelligence had done to her in their search for a scapegoat. The Families Council might be worried about what Wachter would do with the Morrison Fleet, but they would be equally nervous about Imperial Intelligence. Besides, it would take a month to get a message to Earth. By then, the battle for Morrison might well have been fought.

"I will formally protest this to my superiors," he said, finally. "But you can take the prisoners."

"Thank you," Wachter said, with mocking politeness. "Once the Marines arrive, have them transferred to Station Seven. Gently, mind you. I don't want any of them to *accidentally* expire."

"They may well have been conditioned," Smyth warned. "I must ask you not to let them anywhere sensitive."

"They will be watched," Wachter assured him. He turned and marched towards the hatch. "Penny; come."

He didn't say another word until they were back in the shuttle, heading back towards *General Clive*. "That man will cost us the war if he isn't careful," he snapped. "It wouldn't take long for rumours to start to spread."

"Yes, sir," Penny said. She shook her head in admiration. "Did you *really* intend to have the Marines storm the station?"

"People are playing political games," Wachter reminded her. "First Captain Solomon — he's a Rothschild client if I recall correctly — and now Imperial Intelligence. They're quite desperate to avoid the blame for missing the warning signs before the first mutiny."

Penny scowled. “Were there any to see?”

“A large conspiracy could not have been kept secret indefinitely,” Wachter said. “And everything we know about the first set of mutinies confirms that they were planned carefully in advance. I’d bet half my salary that the security officer on the squadron was either breathtakingly incompetent or up to his neck in the plot.”

“I thought they were conditioned into absolute loyalty,” Penny objected. “Or could the conditioning be broken?”

“Not someone like that,” Wachter said. “Or Smyth, for that matter. A conditioned officer has little imagination or initiative. He might react to something obvious, but miss something dangerously subtle. No, the security officer was probably involved in the mutiny. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

Penny shook her head in disbelief. She was used to thinking of Imperial Intelligence as something more than human, a vast implacable force that supervised their lives and watched for the merest sniff of discontent. But cold logic told her that Imperial Intelligence was far from perfect. They’d completely missed the planned mutiny until it was far too late. Even in hindsight, the clues were hard to see.

“They’re *human*,” Wachter reminded her. He tapped the shuttle’s bulkhead gently. “No matter their power and authority, they’re human. And humans make mistakes — or have hopes, dreams and ambitions that get stepped on by their superiors. That’s why the mutiny took place. And that’s why we cannot allow Imperial Intelligence to overstep its bounds any longer.”

Penny nodded, wordlessly.

Wachter reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You did well, in there.”

“Thank you,” Penny said, feeling her cheeks heat. “So did you.”

The intercom buzzed. “Admiral, Commodore Yamani and the 234th Battlecruiser Squadron have returned to the system,” Commander Cain said. “They encountered the rebels at Parallax.”

“A week away,” Wachter said, quietly. “They could be here any minute.”

Penny felt cold ice congealing in her belly. She’d worked hard — they’d all worked hard — to repair the damage neglect, incompetence and corruption had done to the fleet, but now they were about to face a proper test. The rebels would be out for blood.

“Alert everyone on the main command team,” Wachter ordered. “I want a holographic conference in one hour.”

He closed the channel, then looked up at Penny.

“It’s time to bait the trap,” he told her. “And then we will see who emerges victorious.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

"That's impressive," Daria said, quietly.

Colin couldn't help nodding in agreement. Morrison *was* impressive. The naval base had been built up over centuries and had everything apart from a Class-III shipyard; industrial node, repair yards, orbital defences… and facilities on the ground for rest and recreation. It had been years since he had last visited the system — and that had been a very brief layover before his assignment to then-Commodore Percival — but it was clear from a glance that someone was working desperately to get the system's defences up and running.

"Fifty-nine superdreadnaughts, nearly three hundred smaller ships," Colin said. "Thirty-five orbital fortresses, an uncountable number of automated platforms and hundreds of additional gunboats. Morrison itself would be damn near impregnable if *all* of those defences are up and running."

"They might not be," Damiani pointed out. Colin had combined the two fleets into one large force for the attack on Morrison. "We have a good idea just how far the system had been allowed to decay. Even with the best will in the world, it would take years to repair all the damage."

"But we dare not take that for granted," Colin said. The scouts hadn't been able to slip *too* close to the planet, but what they'd found had been thoroughly intimidating. "And yet we dare not leave Morrison in our rear."

The mystery commander — it still irked him that they didn't know who they were facing — seemed to be playing it carefully. He'd held most of his ships within the planet's gravity shadow, which limited their ability to escape… but combined with the planet's massive defences, it would be difficult to damage them in any case. Colin knew, without false modesty, that he could tear up the rest of the system without difficulty, yet it wouldn't make a difference. The planet's orbital facilities and the fleet had to be destroyed as soon as possible.

Or were the ships there because they *couldn't* move?

Colin had been through all the reports, piece by piece. They all agreed that Morrison had been allowed to decay, something that had jibed with his own observations. After all, if Stacy Roosevelt's squadron could skimp on maintenance, why not a squadron that was never called upon to do anything more challenging than float in orbit and look intimidating? But he knew better than to assume that was the case. The enemy seemed determined to lure him down to face the combined firepower of both ships and orbital fortresses. It might well

succeed, too.

He gritted his teeth. They *couldn't* leave Morrison in their rear. He knew it… and he knew that the enemy commander knew it too. He had no choice, but to engage the planet's defences, even though they would be armed and waiting for him. It was odd, given how flexible space travel was, to have to engage a specific target… and yet, there was no choice.

"We'll try to lure them out," he said, finally. He suspected that the enemy commander wouldn't *want* to take the bait, but he would be under immense pressure to prevent the destruction of the rest of the system's facilities. "And if that fails, we'll go in after them."

"Chancy," Damiani said. "They will have too much firepower at their command."

Colin nodded. "If worst comes to worst, we'll rotate the arsenal ships and launch several missile swarms in quick succession," he said. "But we have to take out those ships, at the very least."

He looked over at Daria. "Is the fleet train ready to support us?"

"Yes," Daria said, simply. "The Geeks have also said that more weapons are on their way. But I don't know if they will change the balance of power."

Colin swallowed a curse. Every day he gave the enemy commander to strengthen his position would be paid for in blood. If the Geeks had come up with something completely new, would it be enough to prevent heavy losses? He shook his head, grimly. All of their battles since Camelot had been against grossly inferior forces. This time, they were going to face a battle fleet primed and ready for them. He had no doubt that the enemy commander would have prepared, as best as he could for the arsenal ships… and whatever other surprises he could imagine. And what surprises would *he* have up his sleeve?

"We jump in twelve hours," Colin said. "Inform the alpha crews to make sure they get a good night's sleep, then a meal. Beta crews can finish resupplying the ships, then get some sleep too. They're going to need it."

"Yes, sir," Damiani said. "And our plan of attack?"

"We'll go with Alpha-Five," Colin said. It wasn't the most subtle plan he'd devised, but there was little subtle in charging at a brick wall. If the enemy commander refused to take the bait, they would have to engage the defences directly. And that would be bloody. "You and your squadrons will provide flank cover. The superdreadnaughts and arsenal ships can duel with their opponents."

"We've altered the arsenal ship missile programming," Commander Tobias reported. "If they try to use nukes to take out swarms of missiles at once, it will be considerably harder."

"Let us hope so," Colin said. They'd also copied the idea themselves, but unless the enemy had come up with their own arsenal ships it wouldn't be necessary. "Get some sleep, ladies and gentlemen. I'll see you in the morning."

He watched as they filed out of the room, then turned and looked back at the display. The target was waiting for them, almost daring the rebels to attack. Colin would have preferred to avoid it completely, but he knew there was no choice. The enemy were practically offering him the chance to destroy their fleet on a platter. And that meant… he gritted his teeth, bitterly. If they were making such an offer, they probably had a nasty surprise waiting for him.

Shaking his head, he reached for the switch and turned off the display. The Morrison Fleet had to be destroyed. There was no alternative.

But the thought didn't make him feel any better.

* * *

"You know, this could be our last night alive," Crewman Rogers said.

The spy had to admit he had a point. They were going to be flying straight into the teeth of the Empire's heaviest defences, at least outside the Sol System. There *would* be casualties, massive casualties… and it was quite possible that one of the destroyed ships would be *General Montgomery*. It might very well be their last night alive.

"Honestly," she said, putting as much flirtation into her voice as she could, "couldn't you come up with a better chat-up line?"

"And I have really never seen an angel fly so low," Rogers said, as sweetly as he could. "Or take me to bed, love. You've pulled."

"Idiot," the spy said. "Those lines are *dreadful*."

She shook her head. It was quite normal for Rogers to try to forget what was coming, but she had other worries. There had been no response, as far as she could tell, to the message she'd sent, nor had the superdreadnaught's security staff realised that she'd sent the message at all. Or they had realised and were merely biding their time. The spy couldn't understand why they hadn't nabbed her, if they had realised she was there… but maybe they were playing a complex game. Intelligence officers tended to like complex plots. She doubted the rebel ones would be any different, even if they were rebels.

Her conditioning nagged at her, reminding her of her duty. But what could she do? One single person couldn't sabotage the superdreadnaught, certainly not without help. But her conditioning wouldn't let her do nothing, even though cold logic told her that there

was nothing she could do. All she could do was wait.

"But this is our last night," Rogers whined. "You might die a virgin."

The spy burst out laughing. She was *no* virgin. Imperial Intelligence had taught her how to seduce, how to convince men to lower their guard around her — and that had often meant pillow talk, when the men were half-asleep and unaware of their words. But Rogers had nothing useful he could tell her…

A thought rang through her head. *Why not*?

She stood and held out a hand. "Come on," she said. "Let's go find a privacy tube."

Rogers gaped at her, then grinned boyishly. He'd been nervous, she realised. Was he a virgin? It was rare for a crewman to be a virgin, if only because the senior crewmen often took the juniors to brothels when they docked at naval bases. But Rogers might easily have chosen not to go, if he'd been nervous. Brothels were rarely decent places for young and inexperienced men.

"Thank you," he said, as they made their way to the nearest tube. Thankfully, it was unoccupied. "I… I'll make you proud."

The spy fought down the urge to jeer. Instead, she kissed him as soon as they were inside.

"Relax," she said. Perhaps it *was* his first time, after all. "There's no need to hurry."

Afterwards, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * *

It was unusual to hold a holographic conference, Penny knew, as the images popped into the conference room. The etiquette that underpinned the Empire frowned on sending a holographic representative, even if one happened to be on one's deathbed. Penny had never presumed to understand etiquette, but Wachter's decision to put it aside sent a strong message to his subordinates. She hoped they picked up the right one.

"Attention on deck," she said. If there was one advantage to using holograms, it was that there was no need to use the massive conference chamber. Instead, they could comfortably fit into a smaller compartment. "The Admiral is on the deck."

Admiral Wachter strode into the compartment and nodded to the holograms. "We can discard the rest of the formalities," he said, shortly. "Be seated."

The holograms, blurring together into an indistinct mass, settled down. Penny took her chair and watched as Admiral Wachter took

control of the display, presenting the sensor records from Parallax. It wasn't exactly a victory, despite Commodore Yamani's boasts, but it was close enough to please her superiors. And besides, Imperial Intelligence wouldn't be coming for her.

"You can access the full sensor records later," Admiral Wachter said, as he sat down. Unlike most commanding officers, he had insisted on allowing his officers full access to the sensor records, even from the unsuccessful battles. "The important detail is that the rebels are approaching Morrison. We may see them here at any moment."

A low rustle ran through the chamber as the assembled officers reacted to the news. That, Penny knew, was why the Admiral had insisted on the holographic meeting. If the rebels attacked, the officers wouldn't have to flee back to their ships. But they might also see it as an insult, if they didn't think about it. Too many of the Morrison Fleet's officers had made a career out of following orders without bothering to actually consider them.

"We have worked hard and trained hard for the coming battle," the Admiral continued. "We can take pride in our achievements. We can fight and we can win, which is more than we could have done five months ago. But we dare not let ourselves be overconfident. The rebels have experienced officers, excellent ships and even new weapons. They will give us a hard challenge.

"But we will meet that challenge. And we will beat them.

"They have to come here," he reminded them. "We will be ready."

Penny nodded. The only real alternative for the rebels was to head directly to Earth — some of their raiders might have already reached the planet — but that would leave Morrison in their rear. Admiral Wachter and his fleet might set off for Jackson's Folly, scorching or occupying every rebel-held world along their way. The populations they'd liberated would see Imperial Navy starships in their skies again, each one crammed with Blackshirts ready to purge the worlds of rebels and rebel supporters. No, she told herself. If the rebels wanted anything more than a bloody slaughter, they had to take out Morrison. It was the only way to safeguard their rear.

"I have told you, time and time again, that the Empire is *necessary*," Admiral Wachter said softly. "Do not think about your patrons or your clients. Do not think about the good of your own career. Think, instead, of the importance of beating the rebels here and now. If we win this fight, we secure both our own futures and the future of humanity; if we lose, the Empire may come apart and humanity will be cast adrift on a violent sea as all the old grudges come back to haunt us.

"Today, we fight for everyone. Today, we put the good of the

Empire ahead of our selfish desires."

He looked up, his gaze passing over the holograms. "Make the Empire proud," he ordered, quietly. "And don't forget what we're fighting for."

Penny felt an odd lump in her throat as the silence grew and grew. But what did the Empire mean to her? She'd had hopes, once, of reaching a high rank by her own efforts. But she'd prostituted herself — there was no better word — to Percival, only to discover that no matter what she did, she would never be able to rise on her own. And Percival had beaten her, abused her physically and mentally… and seemed ready to make her the scapegoat for his own failings.

And the Empire hadn't treated her any better. They'd interrogated her thoroughly, almost breaking her mind, before setting her loose and expecting her to still be faithful to them.

And yet… she *liked* Admiral Wachter. He was admirable, very much a rarity among the senior officers she'd met. She wanted to please him, she wanted to impress him, even though there was no logical reason why the Empire should have her loyalty. It had used her, then tried to dispose of her when someone had to take the fall. And yet… her thoughts ran in circles, mocking her. What did it say about her when she would happily give her loyalty to Wachter, a degree of commitment she had never offered to anyone else, while she found herself oddly unconcerned about the fate of the Empire?

"We will follow Combat Plan Nine," Wachter said, his words breaking into her thoughts. "I want Force One" — he looked over at Commodore Yamani, who had been placed in command of Force One as a reward for her victory — "to depart within the hour. Use all necessary measures to remain unnoticed. We have to assume that the rebels are watching the system."

Penny nodded. The advancing wave of rebel starships had long since passed Morrison, assuming that the handful of brutal attacks on supply convoys had been rebel ships. Some of the attacks had been thoroughly nasty, suggesting that pirates had returned to the Core Worlds. The Imperial Navy, so heavily tied up in defending Earth, Morrison and the other Core Worlds, was too badly overstretched to provide escorts. And each attack convinced shipping companies to keep their ships in orbit, rather than plying the spacelanes.

"Force Two will remain here, but go to full tactical alert," Wachter added. "I want double shifts on duty at all times. All leaves are cancelled; if you still have crewmen on Morrison, call them back at once. When the rebels attack, I plan to be ready for them.

"Fortresses are also to go on full alert. Gunboats are to sweep the outer edges of the gravity shadow at all times, watching for rebel

spies. But see to it that crews with special training are held back. We're going to need them soon enough."

He smiled, coldly. "This is the first time since Camelot that the rebels have faced an equal or superior force," he told them. "It's time to make them remember why the Imperial Navy has never lost a war. Dismissed."

Penny watched as the holograms blinked out, one by one, until they were alone in the compartment. Wachter looked tired, but there was an odd glint in his eye. It took her a moment to realise that he was actually looking forward to the coming battle. They'd planned as thoroughly as they could, exercised vigorously… yet they wouldn't *know* how well they'd done until they were tested in fire. And besides, Wachter needed results. There were too many people who would blame him for any failure, no matter how minor.

He looked up at her, as if he was surprised to see her. "Yes, Captain?"

Penny hesitated, torn by a conflicting mixture of emotions. She wanted to ask him, openly, if the Empire was truly worth defending, yet she knew that it wasn't the time. Wachter hadn't bitten her head off for asking questions, no matter how sensitive, but he was truly loyal to the Empire. And then… if he had been Percival, he would have insisted on taking her to bed, knowing it would help prepare him for the following day. But he *wasn't* Percival.

He could have asked — and she would have said yes. But he hadn't asked. He'd respected her right to choose. And, if she did make that decision, it would be hers.

She didn't know if the Empire truly deserved her loyalty. But Admiral Wachter certainly did.

"Make sure you sleep well, Admiral," she said. If he wanted to invite her to his bed… angrily, she pushed the thought aside. He wasn't Percival. "We don't know when they'll be here."

"Soon," Wachter said. He gave her a tired smile. "The waiting is worst of all, apart from the fighting."

His smile widened. "Make sure you sleep well too, Captain. I'm going to need you when the shit finally hits the fan."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"All ships report ready, sir."

Colin took a breath. He'd slept about as well as he'd expected, which wasn't that well. In the end, he'd resorted to a pill for induced sleep, which had left him feeling sick for several minutes after he'd woken up. But there had been no choice, he told himself, as he washed and ate his breakfast. He couldn't go into battle tired after a sleepless night.

"Set coordinates," he said. "Jump in thirty seconds."

His stomach clenched in anticipation as the timer ticked down to zero. Space twisted around the superdreadnaught, flickering them into the Morrison System. Colin winced at the all-too-familiar sensation in his gut, then forced himself to concentrate on the display. It was already filling up with icons. There were enough surrounding Morrison itself to make up a small galaxy.

"Jump completed, sir," the XO reported. "Combat datanet established, datalinks up and running."

"Launch drones," Colin ordered. There was no point in trying to hide. Even a blind man wouldn't have missed over two hundred starships flickering into the system. "Deploy the first squadrons as planned."

He watched as the seconds ticked by. The enemy fortresses were already coming to full alert, while the superdreadnaughts brought up their drives and defensive shields. Their training showed, Colin realised grimly. They'd definitely exercised heavily over the past few months, enough to get their operations down to a fine art. Maybe they didn't have many first-rate commanding officers, he saw, but they had at least one good Admiral.

"Transmit our message," he said. One wave of drones was already plunging towards the planet, a second was spreading out around the Shadow Fleet. The first set of drones would be eliminated as soon as they came within enemy weapons range, but they would have time to provide more accurate information on the enemy positions before they died. "And inform me if there is any response."

Piece by piece, the display updated itself. As Colin had expected, the enemy fleet remained near the planet, trapped within the gravity shadow. They wouldn't be able to retreat for much longer, he knew; it wouldn't be long before his fleet would be able to intercept them if they tried to run. But it would be a foolish move…

They'd be much safer near the planetary defences, he reminded himself. *And our enemy, whoever he is, is hardly a fool.*

The seconds ticked by as the fleet continued its deployment.

Newer installations appeared on the display as the sensors picked them out, only to be dismissed; Colin had no intention of raiding the rest of the system unless there was no other alternative. Ideally, he wanted Morrison intact. But he had a feeling the enemy commander wasn't going to let him take it so easily. The enemy ships were defiantly holding their ground.

"Continue towards primary target," he ordered, finally. Maybe the enemy *would* come out to fight…

…Or maybe they would have to charge straight into a meatgrinder after all.

* * *

Penny had been dozing in her bunk when the alarms sounded. She promptly rolled out of bed, grabbed her uniform and pulled it on, then ran for the hatch. Somewhat to her annoyance, Admiral Wachter had beaten her to the flag deck and taken his place in the heart of the giant Combat Information Centre. The massive display showed hundreds of red icons advancing towards the planet with deadly intent. There were so many of them, combined with the rebel ECM, that the sensors weren't even sure just how many enemy starships there were.

"Launch drones," Admiral Wachter ordered, calmly. "Hang the beancounters for once."

He looked over as Penny came to a halt beside him. "You'll notice, I hope, that the rebels want me to do something?"

"Yes, sir," Penny said. "They want you to come out and fight."

"And if I was a young idiot, I'd do just that," Wachter said. He grinned at her, pressing his fingertips together. "They seem to have jumped in too far from the planet, but they're trying to tempt me. If I take the fleet away, they would have a chance to catch us in the gravity shadow, but outside the effective range of the orbital fortifications. We'd certainly get hurt badly before we made it out."

His smile grew wider. "But we need to make them *think* we're idiots," he added. "Let us prepare for a desperate and futile flight."

"Yes, sir," Penny said.

The communications officer turned to face the Admiral. "Sir, we're picking up an all-ships transmission from the rebel fleet," she said. "They're beaming it right across the system."

Wachter nodded, unsurprised. "Let's hear it."

Penny lifted her eyebrows as the rebel commander began to speak. "This is Admiral Colin Walker of the Shadow Fleet, representing the Popular Front. I call on you to surrender your ships

and fortifications. If you surrender, we will return you to the Empire or intern you, if you do not wish to join us. But you will not have to die for an Empire that is slowly sucking the life out of humanity.

"Think about it! The Empire has destroyed uncounted millions of lives at the behest of the Thousand Families. Your lives, too, have been blighted by their greed. How many of you have been denied promotion because you didn't have the right connections or family ties? How many of you have had to watch helplessly as injustice reigns supreme? Join us — help us put an end to it all."

"Interesting argument," Wachter muttered, making a slicing motion across his throat. The signal cut out. "And one that would have fallen on listening ears, a few months ago."

Penny nodded. Wachter had taken more than a few precautions against another round of mutinies. Armed Marines were stationed on the larger ships, crews had been reshuffled randomly to break up any conspiracy networks and everyone had been kept thoroughly busy, as well as treated decently for the first time in years. But it was quite possible, she knew, that the rebels *would* convince others to join them. There might even be a mutiny on *General Clive*.

"Keep preparing for combat," Wachter added. "And deploy the second flight of drones."

"Yes, sir," Penny said.

The seconds ticked away. There was no mutiny, nor even any unrest as far as anyone could tell. Penny looked over at the Admiral and felt an odd thrill of admiration. There simply weren't any other officers who could have upended everything, who could have made the decent officers and men feel they had a future, and had the nerve to face down Imperial Intelligence. If it had been Percival, she knew, there would have been a competition to see who could mutiny first.

She studied the rebel fleet as the drones revealed more of its nature, before they were picked off one by one. Forty-seven superdreadnaughts, all clearly in tip-top condition; twenty-two bulk freighters that the tactical computers classed as probably arsenal ships. Penny suspected they were right. No one in their right mind would bring a bulk freighter into a war zone. The ships were too slow to escape and utterly unarmed. Behind them, there were over a hundred and fifty smaller ships, ranging from battlecruisers to destroyers. The only oddity was the absence of gunboats.

"Their point defence network is definitely better than standard," Wachter commented. He nodded towards the display, where the remaining drones were trying to pick up as much as they could before they died. But even losing a drone told them something about the enemy network. "Maybe as good as twenty to thirty percent more efficient."

Penny ran it through in her head. Maybe not good enough to make a real difference, but the sides seemed to be evenly matched. Having a better point defence would definitely give the enemy some advantages. She studied their formation, then smiled when she realised that the enemy had pushed out their smaller ships to intercept missiles from Morrison. But they were still out of range…

"They're taking advantage of the delay to get ready," Wachter said. "Apart from the arsenal ships, I see no other non-standard ships in the formation. Do you concur?"

"Yes, sir," Penny said. She hesitated, then voiced her opinion. "But that doesn't mean they don't have other surprises…"

"No, it doesn't," Wachter agreed. "But we can't let fear hold us back, either."

Penny looked up at the display, at the looming rebel fleet advancing towards them, and shuddered.

* * *

Colin watched, grimly, as the enemy fleet remained where it was, under the covering fire of the orbital fortresses. There were probably civilians on the planet right now, screaming curses at the military officers for not trying to defend the rest of the system, but it *was* precisely the right move. The enemy commander seemed to have more freedom than any normal officer would have been allowed.

It made no sense! Colin had been Percival's aide long enough to know that Admirals were never given complete freedom of action, no matter who they were. If they were clients, they were suspected of wanting to place their patron on the throne; if they were aristocrats, they were assumed to be building up their own power bases. No Admiral with such a large fleet under his command would be allowed to operate completely independently. There was normally a triad of senior officers, while Imperial Intelligence would monitor their every move and make careful note of everything they did. Even eating the wrong food could damage a career.

But this commander seemed to have complete freedom of operation…

"No response, sir," the communications officer said.

"No hint of a mutiny either," the tactical officer added. "They seem loyal — or they have guns pointed at their heads."

"Understood," Colin said.

He allowed himself a moment of frustration, then pushed his irritation aside. The new commander had had around six months to prepare Morrison for attack. He had probably vetted his commanding

officers, assigned Marines to various starships and taken whatever other precautions suggested themselves. The last set of mutinies had succeeded through luck and good judgement. It was relatively easy to secure a starship if one had enough time to make preparations.

All right, smartass, he told himself, recalling what Percival had once called him. *Time to see if you really are the tactical genius you're supposed to be.*

"Fall into Attack Pattern Charlie-Omega," he ordered, reluctantly. There was no hope of a quick and bloodless victory. They'd just have to hope that the enemy commander didn't have any other surprises up his sleeve. "As soon as the formation is assumed, take us towards the planet."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

* * *

"They're not raiding the system?"

"I don't think they have anything to gain," Wachter commented, as the enemy fleet picked up speed, heading towards the planet. "If they win, they get the rest of the system without further ado; if they lose, the system doesn't matter anyway."

Penny nodded. If *she'd* been in command of the rebel fleet, she would have wreaked havoc in the system anyway, purely out of spite. Morrison might have belonged to the Imperial Navy, but it was still a massive investment and there were quite a few corporate outposts on the other worlds. Losing them, when added to everything else the rebels had destroyed in the last few months, would hurt. Not for the first time, she asked herself just how long the Empire could sustain the war. She knew enough about the Empire's dented economy to know that it might not be very long.

"They're launching additional drones," she noted. "Do you think they suspect something?"

"Probably," Wachter said. He grinned at her, mischievously. "The only question is *what* do they suspect? The truth… or something else?"

He clapped his hands together, then addressed the coordinators. "On my command," he ordered, "the fleet is to advance towards the enemy."

Penny swallowed. The plan struck her as too much cleverness, particularly if the timing went wrong. But the rebels could hardly refuse the bait Wachter intended to dangle in front of them. They wanted the Morrison Fleet? They'd have their shot at taking it out. But it would also line them up for an ambush…

"Yes, sir," the coordinator said.

The display changed as the enemy fleet finished its reconfiguration, pushing out additional smaller ships as it angled towards the planet. Penny watched, admiring the crisp professionalism the rebels showed. Even after five months of constant exercises, endless drills and summery reliefs for gross incompetence and corruption, the Morrison Fleet could barely dream of completing such a manoeuvre so quickly. Maybe in a few more months, she told herself, if Wachter stayed in command. It was quite likely that the Thousand Families wouldn't allow him to continue to hold the fleet. They'd be more likely to insist he retire again before he got ideas.

"The command is given," Wachter said. "The fleet is to advance towards the enemy."

* * *

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, "the enemy fleet is leaving orbit."

Colin blinked in surprise. Was the enemy fleet trying to escape, although it was too late to do that without a running battle? But no — the display showed the enemy fleet coming right at them, without a care in the world. It made no sense, Colin knew; someone smart enough to do the right thing wouldn't simply throw it away, would he?

He ran through the vectors in his head. There was no way the enemy fleet could escape engaging missiles with his formation, not now. And, trapped in the gravity shadow, there would be no way they could escape the arsenal ships. Even if they had improved their point defence — and his drones suggested there had been some improvement — it wouldn't save them from a hammering. His forces would take a beating too, but it would be survivable.

There had to be a trick. But what?

He briefly contemplated possible alternatives. The enemy could be trying to bluff him, to force him to retreat… or they could have a nasty surprise waiting for him. He examined the sensor records, wondering if the Imperial Navy had finally deployed its own version of the arsenal ship. But there were no non-standard ships included in the enemy fleet. They could have added extra external racks, even bolted missile pods to their hulls… and it wouldn't give them a significant advantage. No, something was odd.

"We will hold position at the edge of the gravity shadow," he said, finally. The enemy seemed to be doing precisely what he wanted them to do. But they had to know it too. "And lock weapons on the enemy superdreadnaughts. Prepare to fire."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

* * *

Penny felt oddly exposed as the two fleets converged. There was no way for the enemy to identify the command ship — Wachter had set up an encrypted signalling system, just to make it impossible for anyone to locate him — but she still felt vulnerable. They would be trapped in the gravity shadow when the enemy fleet closed to missile range. If they managed to fire a colossal missile swarm, she knew the Imperial Navy would be badly damaged.

"Send the signal," Wachter ordered, his voice as calm as if he were addressing a class at the academy. "Tell Yamani I want her ships in position two minutes from now."

Penny looked over at him. If the timing was skewed…

"Our formation is starting to slip," Wachter commented. "Tell the lead starships to hold their horses. We don't want to tip our hand too soon."

* * *

Colin frowned down at the display, puzzled. Something was wrong about the enemy formation, something that was becoming clearer and clearer as the seconds ticked by. The Imperial Navy, having evolved its tactics over hundreds of years, had long since concluded that superdreadnaughts were best handled as a single solid core. There was no point in spreading them out when a solid mass of superdreadnaughts couldn't be threatened, let alone destroyed, by anything possessing less firepower.

But the enemy formation was starting to drift. Some superdreadnaughts were keeping up with the rest of the fleet, others were falling behind. Were they trying to tempt him with the prospect of bringing all of his strength to bear against a small fragment of their force… or did they have something else in mind? Or…

"Enemy fleet will enter missile range in two minutes," the tactical officer said. "They're probing our formation heavily."

Of course they are, Colin thought. *They want to know where to aim for best effect.*

But their formation still made no sense. A shiver ran down his spine as he studied the display, trying to understand what he was seeing. Could the rear superdreadnaughts be having drive problems? Had they lost a node or two? Or…

“Shit,” he said, out loud. The enemy plan was cunning… and he’d almost fallen completely for it. “Alter course; bearing…”

“*Contacts*,” the sensor officer snapped. New red icons appeared on the display. “Multiple contacts, including at least two superdreadnaught squadrons!”

Gutsy bastard, Colin thought. He’d sent a third of his force away, using drones to mask their absence. No wonder some of the superdreadnaughts had seemed to fall back. Drones simply couldn’t keep up their speed for long. *And crafty too*.

“Designate the newcomers as Enemy-Two,” he ordered, as the display stabilised. They’d need at least five minutes to recharge their flicker drives, five minutes he had no intention of giving them. But the enemy commander had caught him very neatly between two fires. If he swung his ships around to engage Enemy-Two, Enemy-One would have a clean shot at his hulls. But there was no alternative. Enemy-Two would be in missile range in seconds. “Lock missiles on Enemy-Two, then fire at will. I say again, fire at will.”

Moments later, the superdreadnaughts launched their first barrage.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Admiral Sahrye Yamani winced in pain as *Admiral Yeltsin* returned to normal space. She had never expected to be promoted, nor to be given such a big responsibility. But there were few experienced officers available and she *had* won a victory, of sorts. Public Information's designated shills had already started turning her into a heroine, informing the public that she had won the greatest victory in history. Sahrye was mildly surprised that they hadn't included the claim she'd faced the rebel CO in single combat and won, but no doubt it was just a matter of time. Public Information was not known for understating anything.

"Enemy fleet is in the projected zone," the tactical officer reported, as the display lit up with red lights. "They're altering formation now."

But they're out of place, Sahrye thought. They'd been so intensely focused on the Morrison Fleet that they would have to alter their formation to bring most of their weapons to bear on her fleet. *We have a chance…*

"Lock weapons on the enemy superdreadnaughts," she said, as if that hadn't been standing orders from the start. "Fire as soon as you have viable locks."

"Enemy superdreadnaughts opening fire," the sensor officer said. "Arsenal ships are holding back."

"Weapons locked on target," the tactical officer said. "Admiral?"

"Fire," Sahrye ordered.

Her superdreadnaughts fired in unison, flushing their external racks and then unloading their inner tubes. Thousands of missiles roared into space, heading directly towards the enemy starships. Their smaller craft hastily started to move, placing themselves and their point defence between the missiles and the superdreadnaughts, but they were badly out of place. It would take several minutes to completely reconfigure their formation and they didn't have the time.

Sahrye's own smaller ships fanned out, their point defence already seeking targets. The enemy missile swarm might have been thinner than they'd been expecting, but it was deadly enough to inflict real damage. Would they try to strip away her point defence cover or go directly for the superdreadnaughts? She watched as the missiles sorted themselves out, then threw themselves at the larger ships. It seemed the rebels had decided that her superdreadnaughts were the logical targets.

"Admiral," the communications officer said, "Admiral Wachter is deploying Omega."

Sahrye smiled. She was the only person on the ship who knew what Omega was, after a very private briefing with Admiral Wachter. The rebels were in for a very nasty surprise if they tried to flicker out, once they realised that they might have bitten off more than they could chew. Unless, of course, they decided to be stupid and jump anyway…

"Understood," she said, out loud. There was always a time when careful planning and forethought gave way to action. "Keep us pressing against their lines."

She allowed her smile to widen. Admiral Wachter's fleet was climbing up from the planet's gravity shadow, while her own was moving forward like a dagger to plunge into the rebel side. And, if the rebels couldn't jump out, they would have to alter course sharply and flee, allowing the Imperial Navy a chance to combine its two formations and give chase. This time, the rebels were facing superior firepower…

"Enemy missiles entering point defence engagement range," the tactical officer rapped out. "Defences engaging… now!"

* * *

Colin silently cursed the enemy commander under his breath as the incoming missiles roared into his formation. With his smaller ships so badly out of place, there was relatively little point defence covering his superdreadnaughts, which had to fend for themselves. They were still part of the datanet, still combining their firepower for maximum advantage, but they couldn't put out the sheer volley of fire they needed to protect themselves. The enemy didn't look to have made any major improvements in their seeker heads, yet it didn't matter. Their targets were far too obvious.

He watched, grimly, as his ships started to take damage. Superdreadnaughts were tough, but there were limits to how many missiles they could absorb before their shields started to fail and allow missiles to strike their hulls. Several ships staggered under colossal blows, one leaking plasma so badly it fell out of formation before vanishing into a fireball. There were no lifepods, as far as Colin could tell. Even if there were, abandoning ship in the midst of a battle ran the risk of being mistaken for a sensor drone or small weapon and being picked off by one side or the other. And then, the Empire would be unlikely to take prisoners — or keep them alive very long, if it did.

"Enemy-one is entering missile range," the tactical officer said. "They're locking missiles on us."

"Flush the arsenal ships at them," Colin ordered, "then order the

arsenal ships to flicker out."

New icons flared into life on the display as the arsenal ships opened fire. Hundreds of thousands of missiles roared out of his formation, plunging down towards Enemy-one. He could have sworn he saw the enemy formation hesitate, even though it was probably a product of his imagination rather than anything else. There were enough missiles in flight to inflict serious damage, no matter how effectively they'd prepared their point defence. Enough, perhaps, to cripple the enemy fleet…

"Force-one is opening fire," the tactical officer said. He frowned, puzzled. "Sir, they're deploying gunboats along with the missiles."

"Curious," Colin muttered. Gunboats had no place in fleet combat, everyone knew that. But the enemy commander had already proven himself a wily bastard. No doubt he had something clever up his sleeve. "Ramp up the point defence, then launch spoiler missiles."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

Colin gritted his teeth. The enemy timing hadn't been *perfect*, but it had been close enough not to matter. If he turned to deal with one enemy formation, trusting in his firepower advantage, the second one would attack from the rear, catching him between two enemy forces. His firepower advantage would be useless if he had to defend against two fleets at once. But the only alternative was to retreat…

"Alter course," he ordered, grimly. Perhaps they could *pretend* to retreat, deliberately allowing the enemy to combine their two forces into one combined force. Then he could bring back the reloaded arsenal ships and hammer the enemy before they diverged again. His hands danced over his console, designating vectors. "Take us away from the planet."

A dull shudder ran through the superdreadnaught as a missile struck home. His flagship had been lucky, Colin realised, as he pulled back and surveyed the damage. Three superdreadnaughts were definitely limping, with several more badly damaged. He might have to slow his fleet if he wanted to keep them with him, which would give the enemy a chance to catch up. Whoever was in charge on Morrison, he decided, had played his cards very well. Perhaps it was time, instead, to cut his losses and retreat.

"The arsenal ships are gone, sir," the coordinator said. "They'll be back within thirty minutes."

Colin smiled, although there was little humour in the expression. Endless practice had cut the reloading times down to barely fifteen minutes per ship. The Empire couldn't have matched it, but then the Empire had never seen the point of building ships that were basically missile carriers and little else. Besides, once the arsenal ships had shot their load, there was little else they could do.

He forced himself to watch as the second wave of enemy missiles approached his formation. A retreat under fire — and that was what they were doing, even if he didn't want to admit it to himself — was hellishly complex at the best of times. Now, with missiles approaching from two different vectors, it was nightmarish. And then there were the enemy gunboats… what the hell were they doing? No one in their right mind would put gunboats in a major fleet action…

* * *

"The enemy fleet is turning away," the tactical officer reported.

Penny nodded. The enemy might be altering course, but they'd fired a missile swarm of missiles towards the Morrison Fleet first. There were not only enough missiles to do serious damage, but also threaten the planet's orbital industries if they got past the fleet. She gritted her teeth as the missiles flashed into the point defence engagement envelope, then started to vanish one by one. The improvements were definitely working, she noted; the ruthless drills the point defence crews had undergone were paying off. But enough missiles got through to take out three superdreadnaughts and heavily damage two more.

"*General Pike* and *Admiral Villeneuve* have taken heavy damage," the coordinator reported, grimly. "*Villeneuve* requests permission to fall out of formation."

Wachter glanced down at his console, then nodded. "Tell her to return to planetary orbit," he ordered. "She may have to be scrapped completely."

Penny winced. The icons on the display were nothing more than coloured lights, hiding the sheer hell that had been unleashed inside *Villeneuve*. Her compartments had been ripped open, depressurising large parts of the ship and taking out most of her drives. It was a testament to the sheer scale of redundancy built into superdreadnaughts that she hadn't been destroyed, although it was a very lucky escape. As it was, Wachter was probably right. It would be cheaper to build a new superdreadnaught than repair *Villeneuve*.

"The gunboats are closing in," she reported, looking down at her own console. "The command links seem to be working."

"Good," Wachter said. He grinned at her, then looked back at his console. "Continue pursuit."

* * *

“The enemy missiles are showing an improved targeting capability,” the analyst muttered, through the intercom. “I don’t understand how…”

Colin looked at the display… and understood. “The gunboats,” he said, shortly. “They’re actually using the gunboats to help steer their missiles.”

Historically, the Imperial Navy had worked hard to improve seeker heads for its missiles, but they’d run up against some hard limitations. Building advanced seekers were either immensely costly or far too obvious to starship-mounted passive sensors, which then ordered the point defence to pick those missiles off first. And no one in their right mind wanted to risk a starship so close to the enemy formation.

But using gunboats worked… indeed, it was so obvious that Colin had to wonder why no one had ever thought of it before. Perhaps someone had, he speculated, and the beancounters had objected. Gunboats were too expensive to waste, they’d probably argued, even without outfitting them with better sensor suites and communication links. Hell, one could build a whole corvette for the price of a handful of gunboats. But whoever was in charge at Morrison had decided that the expense could go hang.

“The gunboats,” he said. But how to deal with them? The tiny ships were hanging on the edge of his point defence envelope; they’d dart out of range if anyone came after them. They were far faster than destroyers, let alone ponderous superdreadnaughts. “Target them with shipkiller missiles, then open fire.”

The tactical officer glanced up. “Sir?”

Colin understood his surprise. They were trading fire with at least fifty superdreadnaughts — the analysts weren’t sure if there were more, although Colin suspected that the enemy wouldn’t hold back now — and yet Colin wanted to fire on gunboats with missiles designed to take out capital ships? But there was no alternative. The gunboats could take control of enemy missiles and steer them towards their targets. It gave the enemy a major advantage…

“Use missiles to take out the gunboats,” he ordered. “Hurry.”

* * *

“They’re firing on the gunboats, sir,” the tactical officer said.

Wachter glanced over at Penny. “Took them longer than I expected to catch on,” he said. “But no matter.”

Penny nodded. Losing a handful of gunboats, no matter how expensive, was better than losing an entire starship. The two

formations were slowly starting to converge into one, settling down to give chase to the rebels… assuming, of course, the rebels didn't try to jump out. *Had* they tried? There was no way to know.

She watched as the remaining gunboats vanished from the display, then followed the progress of the next swarm of missiles as it flashed towards the enemy formation. The enemy were taking damage, all right. A battering match would be unpleasant for both sides, but the Morrison Fleet was right next to its repair yards while the rebels would have to travel thousands of light years to find a usable shipyard. And, by that time, the counteroffensive could begin.

General Clive rocked, violently. "Two direct hits," the damage control officer reported. "We took minor damage to sectors…"

Penny looked over at Wachter. He didn't seem bothered at all. Percival had been a coward, hiding on his giant space station, but Wachter had led his fleet into battle. If nothing else, Penny realised, he had more than earned his subordinates' loyalty by sharing the same risks.

"The question," Wachter said, "is do they *know* about Omega? And is it actually working?"

Penny nodded in agreement. From the handful of tests they'd performed, Omega seemed to work… as long as the original safety interlocks were still in place. The rebels knew that they were dangerously inferior to the Empire in raw numbers; logically, they would search for ways to improve their starships and technology. If they could get time between flickers down sharply, it would give them a major advantage. But that would mean removing the safety interlocks the Empire had installed.

"We won't know," she said. The rebels might just have calculated that a battering match would work in their favour, rather than withdrawing from the system. "We won't ever know."

"We shall see," Wachter said. He cleared his throat, then looked over at the coordinators. "The fleet is to press the enemy closely."

Penny smiled. "Energy range?"

"It won't do any harm to let them think that's what we have in mind," Wachter said. "Besides, we need to press them as hard as possible."

* * *

Colin hated to lose. It had been his determination to win that had guided him to then-Commodore Percival… and his determination not to let Percival destroy his career and future that had led him to mutiny. He took a certain amount of pride in winning far more

battles, both real and simulated, than he'd lost. But the mystery CO of Morrison had beaten him, hands down. Colin scowled at the display, then reluctantly conceded defeat. There was no point in pressing the matter further.

The Imperial Navy was settling in for a long chase, exchanging volleys of missile fire with his ships. They were even *gaining* on the rebels, thanks to the number of damaged starships in Colin's fleet. Given time, they would claw their way into energy range and rip his remaining ships apart. The Imperial Navy could afford to take the losses, Colin and the rebels could not. If they lost their superdreadnaughts, they lost all hope of victory.

"General signal to all ships," he ordered. "We will jump out to the first waypoint in two minutes, then proceed to the second waypoint."

He considered vectors for a long minute as the fleet acknowledged his command. For once, the Imperial Navy would have an excellent chance of following his ships through a jump. It would be chancy, he knew, but the enemy CO had shown no hesitation to take risks in exchange for a shot at Colin's ships. Colin would have to repower his flicker drives at once and jump again, hoping his ships could escape before the enemy ran the calculations and jumped after them. Could they do it in time?

There was no way to know, he knew. There were just too many variables.

The superdreadnaught rang like a bell as four more missiles crashed against her shields. Long tendrils of energy reached through the failing force shields to caress her hull, brilliant red lights blinked up on the status display. Damage control teams were already on their way, Colin saw, but there were limits to what they could do. At least his teams were better than the enemy's, if the long-range sensor reports were to be believed. The enemy didn't seem to be as quick at repairing minor damage as the rebel ships. But it was impossible to be sure.

"All ships report ready to jump, sir," the tactical officer reported.

Colin mentally saluted his opponent. Whoever he was, he had played a good game. And won. For a moment, he wondered what would happen to the enemy CO. If he was an aristocrat, he was likely to be removed from his position quickly, for fear of him becoming another Empress. And if he wasn't, he was likely to end up dead.

"Jump," he ordered.

Alarms rang through the hull. "Sir, the flicker drive is refusing to activate," the tactical officer reported. He sounded shocked. "We're caught in a gravity field!"

Colin's eyes snapped to the display, but he already knew what he would see. Morrison was the closest gravity well… and yet they were

already far outside the planet's gravity shadow. For a moment, he found himself wondering if the enemy had managed to cloak a whole planet before dismissing the thought as completely impossible. A planet could be knocked out of orbit or blown into asteroids — the Empire had done both during the First Interstellar War — but not cloaked. The power requirements would be far beyond even the most advanced technology.

And yet they were trapped.

"Swing the smaller ships behind us to boost our point defence," he ordered. If they were trapped… what if the Empire *had* managed to create an artificial gravity field? Why were the Geeks and Nerds the *only* people who could innovate? They weren't — but the Empire rarely innovated. Everything else the enemy CO had shown them had been cunning uses of well-known technology. "And then continue firing."

He thought, desperately. It had to be a trick. If the Empire could prevent starships from flickering out, it would have deployed the technology long ago.

But how the hell was it done?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"They're redoubling their fire," the tactical officer reported.

Wachter smiled. "Omega must be working," he said. "They would have jumped out by now if they could."

Penny couldn't disagree. The rebels had to know they would lose the battering match — or that they would win, only to have their fleet battered into uselessness. And they weren't stupid enough to stay and fight when the odds were so badly stacked against them. No, Wachter was right. They should have retreated by now. If, of course, they *could* retreat.

The Admiral raised his voice. "Continue firing," he ordered. "And launch the second set of gunboats."

* * *

The spy cursed out loud as the superdreadnaught rocked, almost sending her stumbling into a bulkhead. Whatever was going on outside the hull had to be violent; her damage control team had been rushed from place to place, hastily removing and replacing components that had burned out during the battle. The more advanced teams, she'd heard, were actually working on the hull, even though the superdreadnaught was still fighting for survival. She wasn't sure if that was bravery or sheer desperation.

Rogers caught her hand, then pulled her down the corridor towards the damage control station. The spy glowered at his back; they'd slept together once and now he was all protective? It wouldn't have been so bad, she knew, if she hadn't wanted some privacy and a chance to access the mainframe again. But then, perhaps she would have found his concern irritating even if she hadn't had any other problems.

"Get these components replaced," Engineer Richards barked. He shoved a datapad and a box of spare parts at Rogers, who took them and glanced at the instructions. The ship's network was very good at identifying problems, the spy had to admit. But then, the superdreadnaught design had been established for hundreds of years. "Now!"

Rogers threw the spy one final look, then fled. The spy rolled her eyes, then looked up at Richards. He passed her a toolkit and a handful of spare parts, then another datapad. The spy looked at the pad, noted that she had to climb back into the tubes, then set off. It was less useful than working on the hull or patching up cracks in the

bulkheads, she knew, but it gave her a chance to complete her own mission. Besides, while Rogers and several of the others had complained about not doing anything useful, keeping the ship's various networks up and running was important to their survival. The datanet alone was a key part of the point defence network.

She clambered into the tube and climbed towards her destination. There was a faint smell of burning material in the air, suggesting that power surges had damaged or destroyed more than a few components. One of the shield generators had already failed, damaged beyond repair; the spy had helped the crew shut it down, then put it to one side. It would take hours to replace it, even assuming that they had the required components on hand. By then, the battle would be decided, one way or the other.

There was no sign of anyone else in the tubes, she realised, as she reached the workstation. She opened the hatch to make it look as though she was doing something useful, then spliced her datapad into the command network node. One of the little tricks few crewmen were ever taught was that it was possible to link directly into the network, without setting off any alarms. The spy braced herself, then tapped in the commands to send the message. An accurate update on the rebel fleet, she was sure, would be very helpful to her superiors.

The trick, she'd been taught, was to put the fact she was doing something wrong out of her mind. Criminals were often caught because they were frozen by the thought of doing something criminal, something that could get them in real trouble. They hesitated… and were lost. The spy continued to do her job, even as the message uploaded itself into the communications network. It would almost certainly be missed in the heat of battle.

As soon as the message was gone, she disengaged the datapad and went back to work, removing and replacing each of the damaged components. The network bleeped its approval, allowing her to seal up the section and start making her way back to the damage control station. There was no shortage of work for her and the rest of the crew…

* * *

"Admiral," Penny said, in surprise. "Director Smyth is trying to contact you. He's using the emergency codes."

Wachter turned away from the display, surprised. "He shouldn't have those codes at all," he said. There was a hint of cold anger in his voice. "But why am I not surprised he does?"

Penny wasn't surprised either. It was hard, sometimes, for a

junior officer to get the Admiral's attention. The emergency codes automatically prioritised their message, at the cost of a court martial or summery demotion if the Admiral deemed the message unimportant. They shouldn't have been shared with anyone below the rank of Captain, let alone someone outside the Navy. But Imperial Intelligence had its ways of collecting pieces of information that could be used to its advantage.

"Put him through," Wachter added. "But if it isn't important, I will have him shot."

"Admiral," Smyth said. "Our listening posts just picked up a message from the rebel ships."

Wachter lifted an eyebrow, then looked at Penny, who shrugged. They'd certainly not picked up any message. But Imperial Intelligence was known for having a few tricks up its sleeves that were rarely shared with others.

"Did you?" Wachter said. "And what did the message *say*?"

"It gave a fleet breakdown of the rebel ships," Smyth said. "But it came directly from the rebel command ship."

Wachter smiled. Penny understood. The fleet breakdown was likely outdated by now — they'd certainly inflicted a great deal of damage in the battle — but knowing which ship served as the enemy flagship would be very useful. Taking it out would force the rebels to sort out who was in command, which wouldn't be easy under fire. Even if they had a successor primed and ready to step in, they'd still have to make sure everyone knew that authority had been transferred.

"Pass us the details," Wachter ordered. He'd cut Imperial Intelligence out of the command network, shortly after taking command of the fleet. In hindsight, that might have been an error. "And thank you."

Penny smiled as one of the rebel superdreadnaughts blinked yellow, marking it as the command ship. It was utterly indistinguishable from its fellows, but if Imperial Intelligence was correct… maybe, just maybe, the spooks were worth their keep after all.

"Target that ship," Wachter ordered. "I want it gone."

* * *

Colin forced his mind to think, logically. The false gravity field had to be a trick. He was sure of that, because a *real* gravity field would have shown up on the sensors long before they tried to flicker out. And the arsenal ships had left without impediment. They couldn't have done that if they were deep within the gravity shadow. Hell, a

destroyer could flicker into planetary orbit… no, it had to be a trick.

Or had the arsenal ships simply left before the field was deployed?

He scowled as the Imperial Navy resumed its bombardment, its missiles roaring into his fleet with deadly intent. Thankfully, he'd managed to redeploy his smaller ships to provide some additional cover, now that the two enemy fleets had merged together, but it was still going to hurt him. There hadn't been a running battle for centuries, at least until the revolution had begun. Both sides, Colin was sure, were going to take one hell of a beating. But logically the enemy would still be able to flicker out…

"Damn it," he said out loud, as he realised the truth. Such a simple trick — and so effective when deployed in the heat of battle. Most Imperial Navy officers wouldn't even have understood what they were seeing. "Contact all ships; remove the safety interlocks from the flicker drives."

He found himself laughing in bitter admiration. Most Imperial Navy officers didn't really understand the nuts and bolts of their starships. But Colin, at Frandsen's suggestion, had spent months studying the inner workings of *Shadow*, back when he'd been planning the mutiny. The safety interlocks were just… *there*, unquestioned. And if someone could spoof them into thinking they were in a gravity field, the flicker drive would refuse to activate.

"Yes, sir," the communications officer said.

Colin thought, rapidly. The safety interlocks were physical; they'd have to be removed manually. And that explained, he realised, why the arsenal ships had been able to leave. They hadn't been constructed by the Imperial Navy; if the Geeks had left the safety interlocks in place, they were probably different enough to prevent them from being so easily spoofed.

But would they have enough time to remove the locks before they were hammered into scrap metal?

"Sir," the tactical officer said, "the enemy is locking weapons on us."

Colin looked up. "Us specifically? This ship?"

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. "They have a solid lock on our hull."

Colin blanched as he saw a colossal barrage separate itself from the enemy ships, "Move up the point defence ships to cover us," he ordered. If *General Montgomery* was being targeted by every enemy ship, survival would become very difficult. "And alert Commodore Grayson. He may have to take command in a hurry."

"Admiral, the engineers think it will take at least ten minutes to disable all the sensor interlocks," the communications officer said.

“They’re working as fast as they can.”

“Understood,” Colin said. Engineers had a habit of overstating the time it would take to perform repairs, although he’d tried to cure his engineers of that habit. This time, he hoped they were exaggerating. “Warn all hands to brace for impact.”

He settled back into his command chair, thinking hard. How the hell had the enemy identified the command ship? It should have been impossible…

… But they’d done it.

* * *

Commodore Jeremy Damiani was feeling oddly constrained as the Shadow Fleet retreated from Morrison. Battlecruisers were designed for fast, slashing attacks on enemy targets, not slogging battles. They didn’t have the armour or shields to stand in the wall of battle. But there was no real alternative. If the fleet scattered, they might make it outside the range of whatever was spoofing the safety interlocks — or they might simply be picked off one by one.

“They’re targeting the flagship,” his tactical officer reported.

“Move us to provide cover,” Jeremy ordered. A battlecruiser could be replaced far quicker than a superdreadnaught, particularly one carrying the fleet commander. Colin was vitally important to the rebels, even if he hadn’t realised it himself. He was not only their commander, but the person who had inspired millions of others to rebel against the Empire. “And deploy additional ECM drones, then fire on the gunboats.”

He silently cursed whoever had come up with that tactic under his breath. The gunboats carried enough sensor gear to see through most of the ECM haze, allowing them to target their missiles with a precision that was normally absent. Besides, with most of them aimed at a single ship, ECM was only of limited effectiveness anyway.

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer said. “Point defence engaging… now!”

Jeremy watched, grimly, as enemy missiles started to die. There were some disadvantages to their decision to target a single ship, he noted; the other rebels ships didn’t have to worry about protecting themselves. Colin had improved the point defence network remarkably, but there were still limits. Normally, targeting one ship alone was regarded as poor tactics. But it might well pay off for the enemy.

And a handful of missiles made it through the web of point defence and slammed home.

“The flagship took several hits,” the tactical officer reported. “She lost at least one drive compartment.”

And if she lost the flicker drive, she’s dead, Jeremy thought, grimly.

“Incoming missiles,” the sensor officer snapped. “They’re spreading out their fire again…”

“Brace for impact,” Jeremy roared, as the missiles closed in rapidly. Four died, but three more made it through to detonate against the shields. “All hands, brace for impact…”

A laser head detonated, sending a beam of focused energy punching through the shields and digging into the rear of the ship. Jeremy clung to his command chair for dear life as the ship shuddered, alarms echoing through the entire ship. He forced himself to look up at the status display, then cursed as he saw just how much damage had been inflicted on his ship.

“Fusion Two and Three are gone,” the damage control officer reported. “Fusion Four needs to be shut down, the sooner the better. And the flicker drive is disabled.”

Jeremy felt cold ice running down his spine. If the flicker drive was gone… he looked down at his console, trying to think. The drive field was still functional, but with only one fusion core to provide power and a handful of missing nodes it was anyone’s guess how long it would remain at full power. There was no time to evacuate his crew to another ship, not with the enemy breathing down their necks. Hell, it was far too likely that they would drop out of formation any second now…

A dull thump ran through the ship, followed by a sudden shift in the gravity field. “Sir, we just lost two more nodes,” the helmsman reported. “We’re losing speed rapidly.”

We’re dead, Jeremy thought.

“Bring us about, if you can,” he ordered. There was no point in trying to evade the enemy, not now. Even a ponderous superdreadnaught could run them down — and a gunboat could poke holes in the hull. If nothing else, they’d have a better chance at shooting down the gunboats before they were overwhelmed. “And lock weapons on the lead enemy gunboats.”

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman said. The tactical officer echoed him a moment later.

Jeremy felt a moment of grim pride. His crew had fought splendidly, even though there was no longer any way to escape. Judging by the reports, repairing the flicker drive would be a job for a shipyard, not his damage control crews. But there was no hope of getting to a friendly yard.

“Fire at will,” he ordered.

* * *

Colin cursed out loud as he saw *Shadow* fall out of formation, almost completely dropping out of the datanet. The last update suggested that the ship was too badly damaged to escape, leaving her crew — including one of his closest friends — at the mercy of the Imperial Navy.

"Admiral," the coordinator reported, "the safety interlocks have been removed."

"Understood," Colin said. He stared down at the display. It had been easier when it had just been his life at risk… but had there ever been a time when that was true? "Prepare to jump."

No one really knew what happened if a ship jumped from inside a gravity shadow. Some theories said that the ship was displaced in time rather than space, others suggested that the ship was simply ripped apart and the atoms scattered over countless light years. But now… if they were wrong, if the gravity shadow was real, the entire fleet was about to commit suicide.

And, even if most of the fleet got away, there would be some ships left behind.

I'm sorry, he thought, grimly.

"Jump," he ordered.

* * *

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, "the rebel fleet is jumping out."

Penny looked over at Wachter, wondering — despite herself — just what shape his irritation would take. The enemy had escaped a trap that should have caught them and held them still long enough for their ships to be battered to nothingness, even though she knew that the trap had been largely illusionary. Someone on the other side had worked out what was actually happening and had managed to remove the safety interlocks in time to escape.

"A pity," Wachter said. "But we still drove them away from the planet."

Penny relaxed, silently annoyed with herself. How many times did she have to recall that Wachter wasn't Percival?

She watched the rebel ships leaving, noting absently just how badly scattered their formation had become. Instead of a single mass jump, the ships were leaving, one by one. And five ships remained behind, seemingly trapped.

"Transmit a demand for surrender," Wachter ordered. "Tell them

that we will treat them decently, under the Gulliver Protocols. And then move our ships to cover them."

* * *

Jeremy looked down at his display. Further resistance was futile, he knew. A battered squadron of superdreadnaughts were covering *Shadow*, ready to atomise the battlecruiser if she showed any signs of being willing to continue the fight. He wanted to fire, but it would only get his crew killed. Would the enemy honour their word?

But he couldn't let them get killed for nothing.

"Purge the computers, then drop shields," he ordered. The damaged battlecruiser would need months of repair before she could return to duty, even assuming the Empire believed it worth the investment. "And signal our surrender."

* * *

"Admiral," the communications officer said, "the remaining rebel ships are surrendering."

"Good," Wachter said. He keyed his console. "Deploy the Marines."

He looked up at Penny, then around the compartment. "And send a courier boat to Earth," he added. "We have met the enemy and kicked his ass."

It was not, Penny decided, very elegant. But it got the point across nicely. They'd won the battle, given the enemy a bloody nose and secured Morrison. It would be weeks before the rebels could resume the offensive, if they ever did. Wachter had definitely kicked their collective ass. She knew she should be pleased…

So why did she feel so ambivalent about their victory?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Open the airlocks," Jeremy ordered, as the Marine shuttles approached *Shadow*. He couldn't help feeling nervous, no matter what the loyalists had promised. "Don't show them any resistance."

The rebel crews had been assigned sidearms as a matter of course. Senior Chiefs had collected the weapons as soon as the enemy accepted their surrender, ensuring that armed resistance wasn't a possibility. It wouldn't have accomplished anything anyway, Jeremy knew, but it was quite likely that someone would do something stupid. They all knew what fate might await them as soon as the enemy took them into custody.

"They're ordering us to assemble the remaining crew in the shuttlebay," the communications officer said. "And then wait."

"Make it so," Jeremy ordered. The injured crewmen would have to be moved, even the ones in stasis tubes. "Remind them, once again, not to offer any resistance."

The communications officer looked disgruntled, but obeyed. Moments later, the Marines docked and started to make their way through the ship. Nothing impeded their path as they secured the shuttlebay, then headed up to the bridge. Jeremy gritted his teeth as the first armoured figure stepped through the hatch, weapon in hand. He held his hands in plain view and waited.

"Remain where you are," the Marine ordered, as his fellows followed him onto the bridge and started to secure the crew. One of them wrapped a metal tie around Jeremy's hands, binding them behind his back. "You will be transported off this ship soon enough."

Jeremy scowled as he was pushed against a bulkhead and told to sit down. The first moments of any surrender were always the worst, he knew from training; the slightest hint of resistance could result in a bloodbath. But it was going to get worse if the Empire didn't keep its word, he thought. They might well be treated very badly indeed. It wasn't as if the Thousand Families felt any inclination to be kind to prisoners.

It was nearly thirty minutes before they were helped to their feet and pushed towards the hatch. The Marines had searched the entire ship from end to end, then shut down the remaining fusion core, leaving batteries to power the ship. *Shadow* already felt dead, Jeremy realised, as they were prodded into the shuttlebay. The rest of her crew had already been loaded into shuttles and transported elsewhere. He drew in a breath as his senior officers were scanned, their DNA and fingerprints checked for identification purposes, then loaded into shuttles themselves. One way or another, they were helpless now.

Their fate was in the hands of the Empire.

* * *

Penny watched with mixed feelings as the prisoners were unloaded in Station One. Wachter had insisted on moving the prisoners there as soon as their ships were secured, then grabbed Penny and taken her with him to the station. Penny hoped the rebels weren't planning a second attack, if only because Wachter wouldn't be on his command deck, but they *had* taken a battering. It was unlikely that they could regroup quickly enough to mount a second attack, yet they had to know that they risked losing the war…

"We have identified seventy of them as mutineers, Admiral," Colonel Graves reported. The grim-faced Marine had seen Wachter enter the compartment and walked over to report at once. "The remaining two hundred and fifty-two are unknown to us."

"So few survivors," Wachter mused. "How many bodies did you find?"

"In total, four hundred and twelve," Graves informed him. "We didn't pull them out of the hulks, just left them to freeze."

Wachter exchanged a glance with Penny. There should have been more bodies, which suggested that they had either been vaporised… or that the rebels were so desperately short of crew that they'd been forced to rely heavily on automation. Maybe *that* explained why Omega had been so successful, at least at first. They weren't ready to take the risk of questioning their systems so closely.

"If there's anyone hiding on the ships, they will die when the air runs out," Wachter said, finally. He looked over at the prisoners. "Any surprises?"

"No, sir," Graves said. "They were quite docile."

"That is to be expected," Smyth's voice said, from behind them. "They were not only beaten, they were *defeated*."

Wachter swung around to face the intelligence officer. "Your help during the battle was remarkably useful," he said.

Smyth coloured. The subtle insult hadn't missed its target. "Thank you, Admiral," he said, tartly. "I've come to take the prisoners into custody."

Wachter gave him a long considering look. "I've already promised to treat them under the Gulliver Protocols," he said. "I'm afraid that Imperial Intelligence will not be handling them."

"The Gulliver Protocols do not apply in this case," Smyth informed him. "While the unidentified rebels can be reasonably considered prisoners of war, even though it is a declared legal

principle that the Empire is the sole source of authority and all power derives from it, the mutineers cannot be considered anything other than traitors. As such, they are specifically excluded from consideration — or protection under the protocols."

Penny swallowed an oath. Legally, Smyth was right — and the Empire, which considered itself the ruler of the known universe, had plenty of precedents to back up its view. Everyone knew that interstellar law was what the Empire said it was, even though the Thousand Families hadn't hesitated to change the law when it looked to be barring them from obtaining whatever it was they wanted. What was the point, Percival had once said, of absolute power if someone could get around your laws?

"I gave them my word that they would be considered prisoners of war," Wachter said, coldly. "They surrendered, Director, on those grounds, rather than continuing to fight. I do not intend to break my word."

"But that was not your promise to make," Smyth said. There was an undeniably smug tone in his voice as he spoke. "It was decided, by the Families Council, that any captured rebels were to be turned over to Imperial Intelligence, along with anyone else who might have been… *contaminated*."

He shot Penny a sidelong glance, then continued. "I am willing to concede that the Beyonders are in no need of anything, beyond re-education, but the former mutineers are traitors against the Empire. My orders specifically state that they are to be returned to Earth for interrogation, followed by execution. There can be no mercy for those who rise up against the Empire."

Wachter met his gaze. "They can be sent to a penal world, where they can no longer threaten the Empire," he said. "There is no need to interrogate them."

"But there is," Smyth insisted. He plucked a datapad from his belt and held it out. "One of them is a high-ranking officer in the rebel fleet. Think about what *he* knows! What we can get from him… tell me, Admiral, is it really worth blighting your own career just to keep him safe for a month or two? Because the Families Council will decide to take the captives and interrogate them."

He lowered his voice. "And, by then, whatever they know might well be out of date," he added. "What is the point of resisting the inevitable?"

"I believe the rebels might ask the same question," Wachter said, sharply. "*They* believe that the collapse of the Empire is inevitable too."

"More to the point," he added, "we made them a promise. We told them that we would treat them honourably. If we break that

promise, no one will ever surrender again."

"You just gave them one hell of a beating," Smyth said. "Does it actually matter how we treat prisoners now?"

"The rebels are not — yet — beaten," Wachter snapped. "Until we have occupied every last rebel world, destroyed every last rebel ship and sent every last irredeemable rebel to the penal colonies the rebels are not beaten. And treating prisoners badly will only make it harder to come to any form of political agreement, let alone convince the rebels to surrender."

Penny suspected that his words were falling on deaf ears. Smyth might understand, he might accept what they said, but his superiors would not. Imperial Intelligence had taken a major black eye when the original mutiny plots had gone undetected before they exploded into the light. They needed a victory, just as badly as the Imperial Navy had needed the Battle of Morrison. And they wouldn't worry about whatever Wachter had told a bunch of traitorous mutineers. Why should they?

"We will employ gentle interrogation techniques on the former mutineers," Smyth said, finally. "The Beyonders can be sent to a penal world."

"See to it," Wachter growled. "But remember what I said."

He turned and looked at the final prisoners as they made their way out of the shuttles and into the corridor leading to the holding cells. Penny followed his gaze. The sight of the prisoners sent a shudder down her spine; in some ways, they looked like she'd looked, after Percival had taken his anger and frustration out on her. Their eyes were wide and fearful; a handful of them looked at her, then looked away, as if they were *afraid* of her. And they might well be, Penny knew. They were completely at the mercy of their captors.

Wachter snorted, then turned and led her back to the airlock. "That man will overreach himself sooner rather than later," he snapped, as they stepped into the shuttle. "And I hope I will be there to see it."

Penny hesitated, then took the plunge. "Do you trust him not to abuse the prisoners?"

"No," Wachter said, simply. "But I'm damned if I know what I can do about it."

Smyth had been right, Penny knew. The question of how to treat the prisoners could be referred to the Families Council, which wouldn't give a damn about the consequences to loyalist personnel. If they were prepared to subject her to a full interrogation, even though it might well have damaged her mind, they wouldn't hesitate to mind-rip actual traitors. And if they did delay matters long enough for a message to be sent to Earth and back, anything the traitors knew

would be outdated.

"Sir," she said, carefully, "permission to speak freely?"

"Always," Wachter said.

"This is different," Penny said. "Sir… what's going to happen to you now?"

"They will probably send me back into retirement," Wachter said, dryly. "I'm something of an embarrassment to them."

"Or they'll kill you," Penny said.

"Perhaps," Wachter agreed.

Penny stared at him for a long moment. "How can you be so calm?"

"There's no point in getting worked up," Wachter pointed out. "I knew the job was risky when I took it. I knew that the Families Council were reluctant to appoint me to this position. And yes, I knew it might prove fatal in more ways than one."

"The rebels only have to worry about us killing them," Penny muttered. "You have to worry about your masters seeing you as a threat too."

Wachter nodded, wordlessly.

Penny looked up at him. "Why don't you take over? Become Emperor?"

Wachter gave her a surprised look, so she powered on. "You have a fleet that will follow you anywhere, one tougher than any other formation in the Empire," she told him. "Even battered, this fleet is better than Home Fleet. You could take Earth for yourself…"

"And then what?" Wachter interrupted. "The Empress didn't hold power for long before her reign crumbled."

"Because the patronage networks undermined her," Penny said. "*You* wouldn't have that problem!"

Wachter sighed. "I would," he said. "The Thousand Families didn't end up ruling the Empire because of their good looks. They control, directly or indirectly, almost all of the industrial base. Even if I managed to purge the Imperial Navy of the patronage networks, which would be almost impossible, I'd never manage to dismantle their control of the industrial production nodes without crippling the Empire. Besides…"

He shrugged. "The Thousand Families compete amongst themselves," he added. "It was meant, I think, to help keep them reasonably honest, back in the days when the Empire was young. And then some of them had the bright idea of dividing the Empire up amongst themselves, which ensured that competition slowed to a bare minimum until now. But if I took command, with absolute authority, I would still make a mess of it. The Empire is simply too big to be controlled by one man."

Penny felt tears prickling at the corner of her eyes. “I don’t want you to die,” she confessed. Perhaps the Mind Techs had done far worse to her than she’d realised. “And the Imperial Navy doesn’t deserve to lose you.”

Wachter reached out and gave her a hug. “The Empire is all we have,” he said. “It’s the only way to keep humanity united. But it does have a price.”

Penny allowed herself to relax into his arms for a long moment, then pulled back. He could utterly destroy her now, she knew. It had always been true — but now he could tell Imperial Intelligence that she’d tried to talk him into outright treason. Or he might suspect that she was trying to lure him into saying something incriminating. Imperial Intelligence was fond of such methods, knowing that rumours of their existence would encourage people to reveal any mutinous crewmates for fear that their loyalty was being tested. But somehow she was sure that he wouldn’t breathe a word of what she’d said.

“Here,” Wachter said, quietly. He passed her a handkerchief, which she used to dab her eyes gently. “Don’t worry about me, really. I’ll be fine.”

Penny shook her head. She knew better.

* * *

The holding cell was barely large enough to swing a cat. Jeremy sat on the bunk, trying to massage some feeling back into his wrists. The Marines — and then the black-clad officers who had taken him from them — hadn’t bothered to remove the metal tie, leaving his hands firmly trapped behind his back. Sooner or later, he suspected, they were going to have to untie him just so he could go to the toilet or it was going to get messy.

They didn’t seem to have decided to keep their word, he decided, as the hours wore on. He’d undergone some training for captivity in the academy, but it hadn’t been very detailed. The only people who might take Imperial Navy crewmen prisoners were pirates and they were unlikely to be interested in anything other than rape and possible ransom. Assuming, of course, that their captive was worth anything. Most Imperial Navy crewmen were worthless, as far as the aristocracy was concerned.

He was still mulling over the problem when the hatch slammed open, revealing a pair of masked men. They came forward, grabbed Jeremy’s legs and shackled them together, then spun him around, cut the metal tie free from his hands and then cuffed them again in front of him. Jeremy had a moment to see the red marks around his wrists

before they hauled him to his feet and marched him through a series of barren corridors and into a small room. It was empty, apart from a metal table and two chairs.

"Please, be seated," a male voice said.

Jeremy looked up, surprised, as he was thrust into a chair. The speaker was a middle-aged man, wearing a black uniform. His accent suggested Earth or Mars, probably Mars. Jeremy studied him for a long moment, then looked back at the table. The speaker didn't *look* like a naval officer, which suggested he wasn't the CO who'd won the battle.

"You are, technically speaking, a traitor," the man said. He didn't bother to introduce himself. "You could be shot out of hand and no one would give a shit."

It was a mistake, Jeremy knew, to talk to his captors. But he couldn't help himself.

"I surrendered on the promise of good treatment," he pointed out, tartly. "This" — he rattled his cuffs — "doesn't feel like good treatment."

The man lifted an eyebrow. "Compared to what we would normally do to traitors?"

"…Point," Jeremy conceded.

"Let me be blunt," the man said. He took the seat facing Jeremy and placed his fingertips together, contemplatively. "You were one of the original mutineers. There's no doubt about that, is there? You served on the Observation Squadron and either knew about the mutiny plans from the start or joined when the plans were put into operation. That makes you a traitor."

Jeremy said nothing.

"The punishment for traitors is a slow painful death, as I'm sure you're aware," the man continued, after a long moment. "Admiral Wachter" — Jeremy started; he recognised the name — "has no authority to make deals with rebels. Not to put too fine a point on it, the promises he made you have no legal power. However, we are prepared to honour the promise in exchange for certain pieces of information."

Jeremy snorted. "Name, rank and serial number?"

"A bit more than that," the man said. "Tactical information, the location of your bases, anything other than that…"

"No," Jeremy said, simply.

The man sighed, loudly. "You seem to believe that you have a choice," he said. "Information *can* be extracted from your brain, willingly or unwillingly. The only question is just what state you will be left in, afterwards. People have been known to become vegetables after a session with the mind-rippers. They are quite efficient. Torture

can be resisted, drugs can be misled, but direct mental examination can remove all traces of deceit from your mind."

"Tell me something," Jeremy said, after a moment. "What guarantee do I have that you'll keep your word *this* time?"

The man looked like he had bitten into a sour apple. "The word of an Imperial Intelligence officer?"

Jeremy made a rude noise, but said nothing.

"Fine," the man said, tiredly. He looked behind Jeremy, at the two men who'd been standing behind him. "Take him to the mind-ripper."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

General Montgomery's hull was scorched and pitied with the scars of battle.

Colin stared through the shuttle's cockpit as he brought it closer to the starship's hull. The superdreadnaught had never been *elegant*, but now it was a mess. Giant pieces of armour had been damaged or blown clean off the hull, exposing the soft interior to enemy fire. If the battle had continued for much longer, he saw, the superdreadnaught would have been crippled or destroyed. As it was, they'd been lucky to escape.

He sucked in a breath as he saw the workers swarming over the hull, struggling to fix the damage as quickly as possible. It was far too likely that the Imperial Navy had taken prisoners, he knew, and the prisoners would be made to talk. If so… Colin had ordered the fleet train to jump with them to a random location, but it still bothered him. The loyalists might not be able to find the fleet, yet there was too much danger of the enemy launching a counterattack against worlds currently held by Colin's forces. Or simply licking their wounds and daring Colin to try again.

"What a ghastly mess," Daria commented, from behind him. "But you got out alive."

Colin scowled at her. Losing some of his crew — dead or prisoners — *hurt*. *Shadow*, his first command, was in enemy hands, almost certainly bound for the scrapheap. And he'd lost some of his closest allies and friends. The fact that he had survived the battle and escaped enemy captivity didn't make up for it.

"Yes, I did," he said, finally. He turned to look back out at the mighty superdreadnaught. "I retreated from a battle I deemed unwinnable."

"That wasn't a foolish decision," Daria said, tartly. "And why exactly are you beating yourself up over it?"

"I let the enemy commander lead me by the nose," Colin said. He'd badly underestimated his opponent. If the enemy CO had managed the timing a little better, the rebels might have lost the battle decisively. "I led those men to their deaths."

"They knew the risks," Daria said. "They all decided that fighting the Empire and trying to destroy it was worth risking their lives."

Colin rounded on her. "How can you be so bloody *clinical*?"

"The Beyond is not a place for sentiment," Daria told him. "Yes, you lost the battle — and yes, it is tragic. But the war is not lost."

"We're going to need a few weeks to lick our wounds," Colin pointed out. "We only have mobile repair ships, not actual shipyards.

The damage we inflicted on Morrison's fleet, on the other hand, will be fixed relatively quickly. They could take the offensive or merely remain where they are, blocking us. And, in the meantime, the Empire builds up its fortifications and…"

Daria caught his arm and held it, tightly. "Do you think we've lost the war?"

Colin hesitated, then shook his head.

"Good, because we haven't," Daria said. "You got most of the fleet out, intact. You have repair crews to get your ships back into fighting trim. You have new weapons and other surprises on the way. In short, Colin, you have not lost the war. I don't think there has ever been a commander in history who has never been defeated."

"I suppose not," Colin said, reluctantly. The Great Captains of history had all suffered defeats, some worse than others. They'd studied their campaigns in the academy. "But it is going to be chancy…"

"It's always chancy," Daria said. She pulled him to her and kissed his lips, hard. "We knew when we started that we might lose. But defeatism doesn't help at all."

Colin blinked in surprise, gasping for air. "But…"

"But nothing," Daria interrupted. She kissed him again. "Now, take us back to the ship. We have funerals to attend, then work to do."

* * *

Colin watched, as dispassionately as he could, as the last of the bodies was slowly pushed out of the shuttlebay by the tractor fields. They'd pulled upwards of two thousand bodies out of the damaged ships, most of which had been badly mangled. He'd actually made the decision to have some of the bodies launched in makeshift coffins, even though they were short on materials they could use to produce them. Morale was already low enough without forcing the crew to see the remains of their friends and comrades.

Imperial Navy tradition called for bodies to be buried in space, cast adrift on a course that would take them inevitably towards the nearest star. Hundreds of years in the future, he knew, the bodies would finally reach their destination and burn to ashes, then become part of the universe itself. It was one of the few traditions that the Imperial Navy shared with some of the Beyonders.

"We knew that we had embarked on a long hard road," he said, addressing his entire crew. "The Empire was shaken by our rebellion, but it was still strong. Today, we discovered just how strong and capable it could still be."

He gritted his teeth. The Imperial Navy's officers rarely worried about morale. To them, the junior officers and crewmen were just *there*, entitled to hold whatever beliefs and fears they had as long as they obeyed orders without question. But Colin, who had little of the legitimacy the Empire had enjoyed, knew that he couldn't afford to ignore his crew's morale, not after he'd set a precedent for mutiny. Besides, he needed to get the best out of them.

But public speaking had never been his forte. "We lost the battle, but we have not lost the war," he continued. "There are new weapons and tactics on their way. We will return to Morrison and we will defeat the enemy, then advance on Earth. This setback — and it was a setback — will not be allowed to slow us down any more than strictly necessary.

"We did well against the best the Empire could offer," he concluded. He'd reviewed the sensor logs and noted, much to his relief, that his ships were often far more efficient and capable than the Imperial Navy's fleet. But it hadn't been enough to make a difference. "Next time, we will do better."

He finished his speech and closed the channel, knowing that everyone on the fleet had heard his voice. Would they believe him, he wondered, or would their morale be utterly crushed by defeat? A third of them hadn't even *joined* the rebellion until after the Battle of Camelot. They hadn't seen defeat — or the way Colin had danced around Admiral Percival, reluctant to risk a direct encounter until he'd stacked the decks in his favour. Now… how would their morale hold up after a defeat?

It was a draw, he told himself. But he knew that was nonsense. They'd inflicted considerable damage on the Imperial Navy, but the enemy CO had bested him and retained his grip on Morrison. Perhaps, if Colin had had the reserves to spare, he would have considered it a victory. But he didn't have anything to spare. Even the makeshift warships that added to his point defence were too valuable to throw away casually.

He was still mulling it over as he strode into the conference room, twenty minutes later.

"I have a report from the repair crews," he said, once the brief exchange of formalities was completed. He'd never enjoyed the Empire's obsession with formal protocol. Besides, they'd mutinied against their superiors. There was no point in pretending to be something they weren't. "We are looking at three weeks before we get back up to full combat effectiveness."

"Ouch," Anderson said. The security officer looked rather perturbed. "Can't they cut corners?"

"Not any more than they are already," Colin admitted. He pulled

his datapad from his bet and looked down at the report. “It isn’t going to be easy, whatever happens. Some of our ships really need shipyards.”

He scowled. “Five of them will have to be sent back to Camelot,” he added. “There’s nowhere closer we dare send them.”

There were nods. The worlds they’d overrun during the advance were vulnerable, should the Empire start putting together raiding squadrons. Camelot was relatively safe, although Colin knew that wouldn’t last. Given time, the Empire could mass the Imperial Navy and start rolling up the rebel worlds, one by one. And then they could start scouring the Beyond for the hidden shipyards and industrial nodes.

“However, the new weapons systems are here,” Colin added. “By then, we should have the ships outfitted and ready to take the offensive.”

And hope it’s enough to win the battle, he added to himself. *Because, if it isn’t…*

He pushed the thought to one side and looked around the table. “We took a hammering,” he admitted, softly. “But we will not allow it to get the better of us.”

“There is another problem that should be raised,” Anderson said. “During the fight, the enemy specifically targeted this ship. They were able to deduce the identity of our flagship.”

Colin nodded. He’d gone over the records carefully, trying to determine how the Imperial Navy had identified the ship, only to draw a blank. It shouldn’t have been possible to identify *General Montgomery*, let alone deduce that it was the command ship. Unless the enemy had something else up their sleeves… it looked like a wild coincidence, but Colin didn’t believe in them.

“My staff went through everything,” Anderson continued. “Even so, it took us nearly an hour before we found it. Someone on the ship deliberately identified us to the enemy.”

Colin blinked. “How?”

Anderson flushed, embarrassed. “There are some functions hardwired into the computer core,” he admitted. “One of them, it seems, allows someone with the right codes to upload a message directly into the communications system, which is then transmitted and wiped from the system. We wouldn’t have noticed it at all if the automated recording systems we added to the sensor suite hadn’t noted the message. Minutes after the message was sent, this ship was targeted by the enemy.”

He shook his head. “We’ve placed flags in the system to alert us if someone tries to use it again,” he added, “but we can’t actually remove it without destroying the entire computer core.”

Colin wasn't entirely surprised. Imperial Intelligence and ONI had control over the monitoring systems within the Imperial Navy. Why *wouldn't* they have secret programs buried within the computer cores? It would take years for the core programming to be examined, line by line, particularly anything that wasn't directly connected to flight, weapons or life support. Even the ship's Security Officer wouldn't know about hidden backdoors, not when any spies or informers would be expected to keep an eye on him too. It was sheer luck that they'd stumbled across this one…

Daria put their feelings into words. "Someone is betraying us?"

"Yes," Anderson said. He paused, just long enough for Colin to realise that it wasn't likely to be good. "I think the spy is one of the newer crewmembers."

"Oh," Daria said, irked. She'd brought most of them with her from the Beyond. "And how do you figure *that*?"

"Two points," Anderson said. "One; we didn't have a problem until after the Battle of Camelot, as far as we know. Two; someone definitely betrayed the location of Sanctuary Asteroid to the Imperial Navy. It's possible that two different spies are involved, but it's a bad habit to multiply suspects without good cause."

Colin had to admit Anderson had a point. If they'd missed a covert informer during the first mutinies, they would probably have been betrayed well before the Battle of Morrison. Unless the informer had gone silent for months before making contact… he considered the possibilities briefly, then shook his head. It was unlikely that any informer would just let him cause havoc in Sector 117 when they could have betrayed him at any moment.

"If that is true," he said carefully, "how many suspects do we have?"

"Seventy-nine," Anderson said. "They were the ones who were both at Sanctuary and then came here after Camelot fell. If we include people who weren't at the asteroid, the figure rises to one hundred and fifty-four. I've been trying to find ways to trim the figure down, but we don't have the internal security precautions of an Imperial Navy crew. It's simply not possible to remove anyone from consideration."

And if the informer really did go silent after we mutinied, Colin thought, *we won't even look at the right person as a suspect*.

"All right," Daria said. "I'll assume that you are correct about there being a spy. What do we do about it?"

"We might be able to use this," Colin mused. "Maybe lure the enemy into a trap…"

"The problem," Daria interrupted, "is that the crewmen on this ship are not imps. They will not stand for any form of… *rigorous*

interrogation."

Colin nodded. The Imperial Navy's solution to the problem would be to interrogate all the possible suspects, using truth drugs and lie detectors — and direct brain access, if they had some reason to focus on a particular suspect. But *Colin* couldn't afford to use such methods, not when it would start a mutiny. Hell, Colin knew just how bitterly such methods were resented by Imperial Navy crewmen. Why should the Beyonders be any different?

He looked over at Anderson. "Can't you isolate which unit was used to send the message?"

"The message was wiped completely from the datanet," Anderson admitted. "If the recorders we added hadn't been independent from the datanet, they would have been wiped too and we wouldn't have had a clue that we had a security problem."

"Very well," Colin said. "But you can detect it if another such message is sent?"

"Yes," Anderson said. "Now we know what to look for, we can detect the hidden programming being accessed. And we can probably isolate the sender."

Colin smiled. "Then we keep the whole thing as quiet as possible," he said. "We will need at least three weeks before we can resume the offensive. That should give us long enough to figure out how to duplicate the spy's messages and send a few of our own."

"Perhaps," Anderson said. "The message was enciphered. It may take months to crack the code."

"Or it might have been nothing more than gibberish," Daria pointed out. "All that mattered is that it came from this ship."

"True," Anderson agreed.

Colin tapped the table. "Right now, we need to focus on repairing our ships and resuming the offensive," he said. "Vincent" — he looked over at Anderson — "keep the search quiet, but see if you can identify the spy. Once we're ready to resume the offensive, we will reconsider our plans."

He looked around the table. "This is a complication we didn't expect," he admitted. "But, in hindsight, we should have expected it. We knew Imperial Intelligence worked hard to riddle the Beyond with spies and informers. The bastards simply got lucky."

Daria nodded. "And not all of them had files on Camelot," she said.

Colin met her eyes in a moment of silent understanding. Imperial Intelligence had maintained files on Camelot, files which had identified a dozen spies within the Beyond who were primed to report back whenever the various underground movements managed to get organised. One of them had been the treasurer of a specific

underground movement, who — thankfully — had not had a chance to report back before Camelot had fallen. Another had been a well-known bartender. Both of them had been trusted by the Beyonders.

"We will not fail again," Colin said. "Dismissed."

Daria nodded and strode out, followed by Mariko. The others followed, stepping through the hatch until Colin and Anderson were the only two left in the compartment. Colin turned to look at the security officer as the hatch hissed closed and quirked his eyebrows.

"There's something I didn't want to bring up in front of everyone else," Anderson said. "My analysts have been plodding through the recordings of the battle."

Colin nodded. It was rare for intelligence analysts to produce anything immediately useful during a battle, but post-battle analysis often revealed useful facts that could be taken into account during future operations. But then, the truly important fact was one Colin had already deduced. The enemy CO was crafty and enjoyed an unprecedented freedom of operation. Whoever he was, Colin knew, he had fought well and given the rebels their first real defeat.

"This included a great deal of enemy message traffic," Anderson continued. "Much of it was useless, of course, but a couple of interesting factoids did emerge. Sir… the enemy commander is Admiral Wachter."

Colin cursed his own oversight. How the hell had he missed *that*? But then, Wachter had been removed from his last post on active service for daring to question the Imperial Navy's personnel management schemes. And *that* had been before Colin had even joined the Imperial Navy.

"He's a living legend," Colin mused. "Why him?"

"He *is* minor aristocracy," Anderson pointed out. "They might consider him a safer bet than someone with no aristocratic ties at all."

"Or they might think they would be empowering a second Empress," Colin countered.

"Or they might think it's time to shit or get off the pot," Anderson said, crudely. "What does it matter, Colin, if the Thousand Families are destroyed by us or another Empress takes power? They're still screwed."

"And they might manage to beat another Empress," Colin mused. He shook his head. "He does live up to his legend, doesn't he?"

"Yes, sir," Anderson agreed.

Colin smiled, then looked up at the star chart. Morrison was still glowing an angry violent red. And with Admiral Wachter in command, who was really surprised? But Colin couldn't afford to allow the man's reputation to blind him…

Next time, he promised himself, *it will be different*.

Chapter Thirty

There was little significant about Wolf 359. It was a red dwarf star, nearly eight light years from Earth, surrounded by a medium-sized asteroid field and a couple of rogue comets. The sheer uselessness of the system, at least when it came to housing large numbers of humans, had contributed to the Sandakan Corporation's decision — back before the Thousand Families had been established — to build its primary industrial facility in the system. It might force them to ship their products to other star systems, but it was *theirs*. Even after the Thousand Families had taken control of the human race, Wolf 359 was still their private fiefdom.

"Impressive," Cordova muttered, his tone — for once — serious. "Anyone would think they were worried about being attacked."

"Anyone would be quite right," Commander Patrick Jones pointed out, dryly. "An attack *here* would be disastrous."

The Sandakan Family was one of the most powerful of the Thousand Families, but they had invested almost solely in starship production rather than spreading out their portfolio. It was why they continuously pressed for greater shipping contracts for their shipping lines, he suspected, and why they were so nervous about damage to Wolf 359. Indeed, their investment was so concentrated that it made him wonder if they too weren't suffering from a cash shortage. It was quite possible that Roosevelt wasn't the only one of the Thousand Families in danger of bankruptcy.

But Wolf 359 was very secure. A hundred shipyard structures, including a giant Class-III shipyard, hung in orbit around the red star, surrounded by over two hundred industrial nodes and a hundred heavily-armed fortresses. And *they* were backed up by dozens of starships, including a superdreadnaught squadron that seemed more active than any of the squadrons they'd observed on their way from Jackson's Folly to Wolf 359. A direct attack against the shipyard would be futile.

"It would put them at death's door," Cordova agreed. It was odd how he seemed to understand the Thousand Families, although most Imperial Navy officers had at least a passing familiarity with how the system worked. "Let's see if we can open it for them, shall we?"

He grinned at his own joke — as if it wasn't from a well-known piece of public entertainment — and then turned to face his crew. "Have you reprogrammed the flicker drive?"

"Aye, sir," the engineer said. "And installed the replacement systems. But it will be risky…"

"I know," Cordova said. "But remember, risk is our business."

Patrick winced. There was one obvious weakness to the whole structure, one that Cordova had gleefully pointed out as soon as they'd started looking at the reports from the stealthed drones. Indeed, it was so obvious that Patrick had racked his brains trying to understand how it could be a trap. But it seemed that the Sandakan Family had never considered just how crazy some of their enemies could be. The system had never been threatened, not even during the First Interstellar War. They'd grown lax… and careless.

Cordova stood and moved over to his command chair. "Power up the drives," he ordered. "We jump in ten minutes."

Patrick took his seat and braced himself. The Imperial Navy would have recoiled in horror from what Cordova had in mind. Even the most idiotic Admiral would have had second thoughts. But Cordova had seen the possibilities and started to outline his plan before Patrick could think of any proper objections. And his crew were just going along with it…

He shook his head in disbelief as the drives started to power up. Whatever happened, they were going to make history. He just hoped that they survived the experience.

* * *

"The gunboats sent a message, sir," Lieutenant Lester reported. "They found nothing."

Commodore Amir Sandakan nodded, sourly. Wolf 359 was never visited, save by the family's starships and the occasional smuggler who thought he could slip into the shipyard and make a few new contacts. Normally, they were chased away quickly by the security patrols, if they didn't think better of it after looking at the brooding fortresses. Besides, the Sandakan Family paid the best rates in the Empire. There were few discontented workers in the massive complex and those who were openly discontented tended to leave quickly.

"Tell them to return," he ordered. The brief detection of a flicker pulse might have been nothing more than a glitch… or a starship, jumping out instead of jumping in. Maybe someone had tried to sneak into the system, then withdrawn as covertly as they had arrived. "We can run a tracking exercise on them as they come."

"Understood, sir," Lester said.

Amir turned and looked up at the massive display. There had been no way to avoid realising that Wolf 359 had been slowing down for years, ever since the Empire had stopped producing new superdreadnaughts. Indeed, demand for smaller starships and commercial starships had been falling too. The more he'd looked at

the figures, the more he'd started to realise that the family was on the verge of serious problems. It took a major investment to keep Wolf 359 operating and that investment might no longer be forthcoming…

But Jupiter is gone, he thought, wryly. *And the rebels might ensure we get more contracts*.

Alarms sounded, cutting into his thoughts. "Commodore," Lester said, panic evident in her voice, "enemy contacts! Right on top of us!"

Amir stared in disbelief. Someone had flickered right *into* the shipyard!

"Red alert," he ordered, numbly. New icons had appeared on the display, right in the centre of the complex. The giant explosion that had blown one industrial node to hell suggested that one of the enemy starships had interpenetrated, flickering into space already occupied by the node. *That* almost never happened, at least outside simulations. "Order the starships to intercept the intruders."

But he knew that it was already too late.

* * *

"*Mother's Milk* is gone," the tactical officer reported. "Everyone else made it."

"Open fire," Cordova ordered. "Blast everything in range with energy weapons, reserve the external racks for the defenders."

Patrick shook his head. They'd jumped into a crowded region of space and survived the experience, only losing one ship. And now, with the shipyard facilities at point-blank range, they could be ripped apart with ease. *Random Numbers* opened fire with her energy weapons, punching through the weak shields and setting off a chain of fission explosions that started to rip the structure apart. The shipyard was designed to be taken apart and reassembled quickly; it couldn't even hope to stand up to such a barrage. He caught a brief glimpse of a half-constructed light cruiser blown into flaming debris, before it was gone.

"Enemy gunboats closing in," the tactical officer said. "Enemy superdreadnaughts are on their way."

"Keep our distance from the superdreadnaughts, if possible," Cordova ordered. Their immediate targets had been wiped out, leaving them to advance towards the secondary set of targets. "Lock missiles on the asteroids, then fire at my command."

Patrick gave him a sharp glance. Launching missiles at the asteroids meant that Cordova had given up on the idea of engaging the defenders, although they couldn't hope to win a running battle. But, in the long term, taking out the shipyard was much more

important than taking out nine superdreadnaughts and their escorts. The superdreadnaughts couldn't be replaced quickly if the Empire had to rebuild the shipyard first.

"Missiles locked, sir," the tactical officer said.

"Fire," Cordova ordered.

Patrick felt a dull glow of triumph as the missiles screamed towards their targets. The giant asteroids and industrial nodes had no point defence, even though the gunboats altered course rapidly and gave chase in hopes of overrunning the missiles before they struck home. One by one, the asteroids shattered, scattering their contents out into space. He felt a moment's pity for the inhabitants, many of them skilled workers, but he knew they were too dangerous to leave alive. It would take the Empire years to rebuild the workforce, assuming they bothered to try. Ignorant workers, the Empire believed, were happy workers. But they were also much less effective.

"Incoming fire," the tactical officer snapped. "The fortresses have a lock on us."

"Deploy ECM drones," Cordova ordered. The enemy CO had evidently forgotten any concerns he had about firing shipkillers into the heart of the structure. But then, most of the shipyard was already gone. "And keep powering up the drive."

"Two minutes, sir," the helmsman reported. "Taking evasive action…"

Patrick braced himself as the fortresses went to rapid fire. If the enemy overwhelmed them before the flicker drive powered up, they were dead. But the enemy had already lost the shipyard, to all intents and purposes. It would take years for them to rebuild, assuming they could afford it…

* * *

Amir watched helplessly as his worst nightmare developed in front of him. The shipyards were fragile structures; one by one, they were ripped apart by the demon-spawned enemy fleet. Beyond them, the asteroids were tougher, but not tough enough to stand up to shipkiller missiles. The workforce that kept the shipyard going was being slaughtered, right in front of his eyes. And there was nothing he could do to stop the slaughter.

"Sir," Lester said, "we have clear locks on their hulls…"

"Keep firing," Amir ordered. But he knew it would be futile. Even if the entire enemy fleet was wiped out, it wouldn't make up for the destruction they'd inflicted. The shipyard would need *years* to replace.

“And order the gunboats to close to minimum range.”

* * *

Random Numbers shuddered, violently, as a missile struck home.

“*Dashing Dave* is gone,” Patrick snapped, looking down at his console. “*Thunderbird* is losing shields, rapidly.”

“Flicker drive powered up,” the helmsman reported.

“Get us out of here,” Cordova snapped.

Patrick braced himself. A second later, the universe flickered and faded away to nothingness… and then reformed in front of him. The pain struck him a second later, a blow so powerful he was convinced his heart was about to fail. He slumped in his chair, stunned by the force… and he wasn’t the only one. Red alarms were sounding, but it was so hard to care. Helplessly, he slid into darkness…

* * *

“They’re gone, sir,” Lester reported. “They all jumped out.”

“They must have disengaged *all* of the safety interlocks,” Amir muttered. He knew more than a little about interstellar drives; the rebels had to have modified their systems extensively to allow them to jump twice in such quick succession. Chances were that one or more of the ships wouldn’t make it through the jump intact. “Tell the defenders to stand down, then report in to me.”

He watched, in numb horror, as the final toll scrolled up on his display. All, but one of the shipyards had been blasted to smouldering rubble. Nine of the ten asteroids had been destroyed, taking their inhabitants with them. Hundreds of thousands of workers and their families were dead. And over seventy percent of the industrial nodes had been wiped out, shattering their ability to repair the damage without calling for help from Earth. All in all, he realised, the rebels had scored a stunning victory.

We got lazy, he thought. Back when the shipyard had been established, the flicker drive hadn’t been anything like so accurate. No one had really realised just how vulnerable the shipyard was to a determined or suicidal attacker. Hell, the family had worked hard to keep the system as isolated as possible. But now the illusion of security had been torn aside and the shipyard was in ruins.

“Prepare a courier boat,” he ordered. The Sandakan, the Family Head, would have to be informed as soon as possible. God alone knew what he’d do. The more he thought about it, the more Amir realised

that the attack had been utterly disastrous. If the family couldn't meet its obligations, it would very rapidly start to follow the Roosevelt Family into collapse — and ruin. "And prepare a complete report on the damage."

"Yes, sir," Lester said.

He'd failed, Amir knew. Twenty years of experience with the Imperial Navy's Fortress Command, fifteen more with the Sandakan Household Troops… and he'd failed, completely. And his failure hadn't cost the family a starship, or a single industrial node, but everything they owned. Somehow, he was sure that the other investments wouldn't be enough to make up the losses. The entire family was on the edge of absolute ruin.

Cold logic told him that the flaw in the defences had been there since the start, that there was little that could be done about it save for moving the entire shipyard to another star system. But somehow cold logic didn't reassure him. If he'd thought about it, he could have installed additional weapons, even mounting them on the shipyard structures themselves. He knew just how badly he'd failed the family…

"The courier boat is ready," Lester said.

"Send them the complete report, then tell them to nominate my replacement," Amir ordered, tartly. "You have the deck."

He stepped through the hatch, into his cabin. It was a nice suite, he had to admit; it housed himself, his wife and his two children quite comfortably. But their lives would be blighted too, even though they had nothing to do with his mistakes. The Sandakan Family had no tolerance for failure, even among their own kin. They'd be lucky if they weren't told to spend the rest of their lives on a world that, no matter how comfortable, was very definitely a prison.

Pouring himself a glass of wine, he sat down at his desk and studied the pictures he'd hung on the walls. His wife was gorgeous, thanks to the most elaborate cosmetic surgery money could buy, while his twin girls were the cutest little girls in the universe. Maybe they were at the stage where they were dreadfully embarrassed when their father called them cute, but they *were* cute. Amir looked at their long dark hair, framing their dark faces, and felt a pang of guilt. They were his daughters and he had failed them.

He opened the desk drawer and removed the pistol. It had been a present from his crew when he'd left Fortress Command, something he valued because no one could have *forced* them to offer him something so practical. Normally, sycophants would produce a plaque or something that required minimal effort. A working pistol would require hours of paperwork, particularly a chemical weapon instead of a plasma blaster.

Placing the weapon on the table, he scribbled three notes. One for his XO, who would have to assume command; one for his wife, to apologise for his failure; one to the Family Head, accepting full responsibility for the disaster. By now, for all he knew, word had already reached Earth. Humanity's homeworld was only eight light years away, after all.

He hesitated, then reached for the pistol. Quite calmly, he put the weapon to his temple and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Patrick slowly fought his way back to full awareness. His chest hurt, as did his head, pounding away as if someone was firing cannons inside his skull. But, as he opened his eyes, the pain slowly started to fade away. He was lying on a bed in sickbay, a concerned-looking doctor staring down at him. Behind the doctor, Cordova was waiting.

"Captain," he croaked. "I…"

"A bad case of jump shock," the doctor said, briskly. She looked over at Cordova. "He really needs to take it easy for a day or two, as do the other victims."

"I know," Cordova said. "We're going to have to wait here for a few days in any case, at least until we repair the drive and replace the damaged components. The crew can recuperate in peace."

Patrick forced himself to sit up. "The crew?"

"A third of the crew has jump shock," the doctor said, sharply. She gave him an assessing look. "I'm not too surprised, really. Making such a jump could easily have killed everyone on the ship."

"It was that or die," Cordova said. "But we made it out."

Patrick nodded. "How many ships?"

"We lost seven," Cordova admitted, reluctantly. "But we wiped out most of the shipyard and probably wrecked the Sandakan Family. Not a bad rate of exchange, I feel."

"Perhaps." Patrick agreed. Seven ships, a fifth of the raiding fleet. But, right now, the Empire would have real trouble rebuilding its superdreadnaught squadrons. They only had one Class-III shipyard left, in the Terra Nova System. "Terra Nova?"

"It's too obvious," Cordova said. Clearly, he'd been having similar thoughts. "And they will guard it *thoroughly* as soon as they hear about Wolf 359."

"And it would be harder to attack in any case," Patrick said. The Terra Nova Shipyard, like the Jupiter Shipyard, orbited a gas giant. They couldn't launch a flicker attack and hope to survive. Unless they used smaller shuttles… "Captain…"

“Get some rest,” Cordova ordered. He gave Patrick a brilliant smile. “We’re safe now. We can take a day or two to recuperate…”

“Do it in your own cabin,” the doctor ordered. She marched over and made irritated gestures at them. “I need the bed.”

Cordova nodded, then helped Patrick to his feet. “Get some rest, then join me for our next planning session,” he ordered. “Or talk someone into bed, if you like. We do have plenty of time to think about planning our next course of action.”

He snickered, then winked. “And just think! These are the problems of victory. How do you think they’re feeling?”

Patrick had to smile. By now, word would definitely have reached Earth. The Thousand Families would be near panic. Who *knew* how they’d react? How *could* they react?

Maybe they will negotiate, he thought. It didn’t seem very likely. *Or maybe they will resort to desperate measures*.

Chapter Thirty-One

Whiplash, Tiberius thought. *We have whiplash.*

Admiral Wachter's courier boats had broken all speed records to get news of the Battle of Morrison back to Earth. But, a day after the news from Morrison had arrived, word had arrived from Wolf 359. The giant shipyard and industrial production facility had effectively been destroyed. Countless facilities were gone and the workforce was dead.

The effect had been immediate. Confidence in the Sandakan Family had collapsed, particularly after the Family Head moved to secure the family's remaining investments. Right now, they were on the slippery slope towards bankruptcy and the remaining families were rapidly calculating how best to take advantage of the situation — or avoid being dragged down with the Sandakan Family. And Tiberius knew that their collapse would hurt *his* family. There were outstanding debts and contracts that would never be honoured.

He watched with grim amusement as the Families Council convened. The Sandakan had, naturally, been told that his presence was no longer welcome. Surprisingly, he had tried to fight, to insist on his rights, even though his family was struggling for survival. It had taken Tiberius several minutes to realise that the council vote could be farmed out to the highest bidder, even though that was technically against the rules. But then, rules were what the Thousand Families said they were.

Grand Admiral Porter was the first to speak.

"The latest report from Wolf 359 states that over eighty-five percent of the total productive facility has been lost," he said, in a droning voice that tried to minimise the effects of the blow. "Long-term effects will hamper our ability to rebuild our fleets and resupply the Imperial Navy with anything larger than a destroyer or light cruiser. Even our missile production facilities have been impacted. Shortages can be expected for several months to come before we can reconfigure other industrial nodes…"

Tiberius listened, carefully, as the Admiral droned on. Nothing he said was *new*, precisely, but he'd hoped that there would be encouragement. Instead, the news was almost worse than he had feared. At best, their plans to take the offensive against the rebels would have to be put off for several years, despite the victory at Morrison. And at worst… the rebels might just have scored a war-winning blow.

"I trust," Lord Rothschild said, "that steps have been taken to secure Terra Nova?"

"I have ordered the dispatch of an additional superdreadnaught squadron from Home Fleet," Admiral Porter said. "My analysts are already considering additional security measures for the system."

"Such matters are my family's responsibility," Lord Bernadotte snapped. "By long custom…"

"Right now, your shipyard is the *only* one capable of replacing the lost superdreadnaughts," Lord Rothschild pointed out. "Failing to protect it could be disastrous."

And it has nothing to do with the fact you want a lever over your rival, Tiberius thought, coldly. *Taking the shipyards into general ownership would please you, wouldn't it*?

"My Household Troops will not be caught on the hop," Lord Bernadotte said. "It was damn careless of the Sandakan to leave such a flaw in the yard's security."

"But not one he was responsible for," Tiberius muttered.

Lord Bernadotte glared at him. "And you think *I* am responsible for the poor decisions of *my* ancestors?"

Tiberius resisted the urge to point out that was exactly what he had tried to imply about the Sandakan, but held his peace.

"We cannot afford to lose your shipyard," Lord Rothschild said, softly. "You will maintain full control of the installation. We will merely provide security."

"That can be handled later," Tiberius said. "We must now consider the long-term course of the war — and the future of the Empire."

He took a breath, then pressed on. "The Sandakan Family is unable to meet its debts," he said, flatly. All of his analysts agreed on that point, although they weren't certain just how long it would be before the final collapse. Like most of the Thousand Families, the Sandakan Family had assets that were off the books. "When it goes down, it will seriously damage the rest of us."

There were nods of agreement. Even if the families worked together, they were all going to take a blow. And the families were simply not good at working together.

"We cannot afford another blow like that," Tiberius continued. "I think we should seriously consider coming to terms with the rebels."

"Out of the question," Lord Bernadotte thundered. "This is the worst *possible* moment for considering peace with the rebels."

Tiberius met his eyes. "We won a victory at Morrison," he said. "The rebels were knocked out of the system, in complete and total disarray. But we lost Wolf 359, which threatens our ability to replace our losses as well as our entire economic edifice. What happens if we take another blow like that? What happens if we have to keep paying for the war effort while we are unable to pay debts and meet our

obligations?

"We might win the war and lose the Empire.

"This is our moment to offer peace terms," he added. "Let the rebels have Sector 117. Let them have their other conquests. Let them take the underground members from Earth and the rest of the Core Worlds. We will reconfigure our economy, recover from the war and replace our losses. By then, the war can be restarted with impunity."

"You would be forcing us all to accept massive losses," Lord Rothschild said, thoughtfully. "None of the rebel conquests would be returned to us."

"Better to lose part of the Empire than all of it," Tiberius insisted. "Right now, the rebels are just as shocked as we are. But once they run the calculations for themselves, they will know that we are actually in a very weak position. And then they will resume the war."

"You're young," Lord Bernadotte said.

"And what," Tiberius asked sharply, "does my youth have to do with anything?"

"The young are idealistic, just like the fools who believed that the Empress would reform the system and — just incidentally, give them power and position," Lord Bernadotte hissed. "You do not realises, *young man*, that we *cannot* let our grip on power slack. Do you really imagine, in your ivory tower, that the population *loves* us? What do you think would happen if we allowed another interstellar power to exist?

"I'll tell you what will happen," he added. "We will be out-produced. The Geeks and Nerds will push the limits of technology as far as they will go. It won't be long before our economy is completely up-ended by their research, while we struggle to repair the damage from the war. And the mere existence of a different political system will give our population ideas, won't it? No matter what we do, they will be discontented. They will revolt."

He looked around the table, as if he were pleading with them to understand. "We stand at the top of a very shaky power structure," he said. "We are, in effect, riding a tiger. But if we try to get off, the tiger will eat us."

"And if we try to stay on," Tiberius said, "we may be knocked off anyway."

Lord Bernadotte ignored him. "For the past thousand years, we have controlled the Empire to suit ourselves," he said. "We have rewritten the laws as necessary. We have absorbed, assimilated or destroyed competition. Anyone who looked like posing a threat to our dominance was simply pushed out of business. But how well would we do if we no longer controlled everything? Would we be able to compete?"

He was right, Tiberius knew. But would they be able to stay in control?

"The best we could hope for," Lord Bernadotte concluded, "is a gradual loss of power and eventual collapse. What *else* would there be for us?"

"Perhaps we could reconfigure ourselves to survive, even in a universe of free competition," Tiberius suggested.

"And are you," Lord Bernadotte asked, "willing to take that chance?"

He met Tiberius's eyes. "Are you willing to risk everything your ancestors built up, knowing that it could all be lost?"

"I believe that it is already at stake," Tiberius said, stiffly. "Even if all the rebels dropped dead tomorrow, we would still be struggling for years to rebuild. And well…"

He paused for effect. "And there is the other fact that seems to have been overlooked."

Lord Bernadotte grimaced. "And that is…?"

"Wolf 359 is just under eight light years from Earth," Tiberius said, quietly. "The rebels could be probing the Sol System right now."

"Home Fleet stands by to repel any offensive," Admiral Foster said, quickly. "We have drilled and exercised endlessly…"

"Thank you," Tiberius said, cutting him off. He'd read the reports from his clients and few of them had been anything like so optimistic. "What is to stop the rebels mounting another raid, this time aimed at Earth? And what will it do to the underground's morale if they see the rebels raiding the Sol System?"

He looked down at the table. The underground had been quieter since the security forces had raided a dozen hidden bases, but they'd definitely been infiltrating the orbital defences. A dozen would-be operatives had been caught, leaving Tiberius wondering just how many they'd missed. It was alarmingly possible that Home Fleet was already infiltrated too.

"We should vote," Lord Bernadotte said. "Tiberius has made his case — and I have discussed the issues with coming to *any* kind of agreement with the rebels. All those in favour of sending a mission to discuss peace?"

Tiberius stuck up his hand, but he was alone. Even the doves were unwilling to commit themselves to discussing peace.

"The matter is now closed," Lord Bernadotte commented. He shot Tiberius a snide glance. By custom, once the vote had been taken, the matter could not be opened again, at least unless the situation changed remarkably. "We must now consider the issue of Admiral Wachter and the POWs. I do not believe that we can dispute that Admiral Wachter overstepped his authority in making *any* promises to

the rebels."

Tiberius sighed. Admiral Wachter had sent dispatches… but so had the Imperial Intelligence officers and the spies within the Morrison Fleet. The latter two all agreed that Admiral Wachter had ensured that little reliable information could be extracted from the prisoners, regardless of their origins. They'd been forced to restrict themselves to gentle methods of extracting information, something that they found uncomfortable.

"We certainly issued a death sentence for any rebels," Lord Rothschild agreed. "Admiral Wachter definitely shouldn't have made them any promises, certainly not ones that could rebound on us."

"But the rebels will fight harder if they believe they cannot surrender," Tiberius pointed out, tiredly. He *agreed* with the Admiral's logic, even though he wished they'd discussed the possibility earlier. But then, the Thousand Families had been in no mood for compromise even before the victory at Morrison. Admiral Wachter might have left with orders to butcher all prisoners upon capture. "And we will also abandon any hope of using them for propaganda purposes."

"This is a sign of disturbing independence on the Admiral's part," Lord Bernadotte added. "Do we wish to leave him in his position?"

"He just won our one true victory," Tiberius snapped. "The war is not yet won and you're already plotting to remove him?"

"And what," Lord Bernadotte asked in tones of sweet reason, "if he turns on us?"

"We cannot afford to get rid of him now," Tiberius insisted. "The rebel fleet was damaged, but it escaped largely intact. They will recover and they *will* resume the offensive. And when that happens, we had damn well better be prepared to meet it!"

Lord Bernadotte gave him a sharp look. "First arguing for peace talks, then defending the prisoners… are you convinced that we will lose this war?"

"We could win and find ourselves bankrupted," Tiberius reminded him. "I don't think I wish to win on those terms. And besides…"

He hesitated, then appealed to their sense of self-preservation. "Let us assume that we lose the war," he said. "What will the rebels do to us if we torture prisoners?"

"There's a difference between interrogation and torture," Lord Edison injected.

"Yes," Tiberius agreed. "They're spelt differently."

He pressed on before anyone could interrupt. "When the war is won," he insisted, "we can do whatever the hell we like. We can execute all the rebels or send them to godforsaken penal colonies. But until then, we have some interest in treating prisoners gently."

Lord Edison snorted. “Even traitors to the Empire?”

“Even them,” Tiberius said. Director Smyth’s memo had been interesting, if only because of the logical hair-splitting. One could evade the Admiral’s instructions by arguing that traitors were already sentenced to death, even though they’d surrendered upon a promise of good treatment. “It is in our interests to treat prisoners gently.”

“Very well,” Lord Bernadotte said. He glanced around the table. “All those in favour?”

Tiberius held his breath… then sighed in relief as nine Family Heads sided with him.

“The Admiral may still be a problem,” Lord Rothschild said. “I propose that we dispatch additional security forces to Morrison. If he decides to turn on us, we can have him eliminated before he becomes a very real problem.”

There was no disagreement.

Tiberius wasn’t really surprised. Powerful subordinates — over-mighty subordinates — were a persistent problem for the Empire. Someone competent enough to be useful was also someone competent enough to be a very real threat. The entire Imperial Navy edifice was designed to ensure that anyone who *did* reach high office was either lacking in ambition or thoroughly subverted to a patron. Admiral Wachter might have come from minor aristocracy, but that wouldn’t reassure them. The Empress had been minor aristocracy too.

“And we should also have all POWs sent here,” Lord Bernadotte added. “For safe-keeping, of course.”

“Of course,” Tiberius agreed, dryly. Just because interrogation was forbidden wouldn’t stop Public Information trying to use them. If one of the mutineers switched sides again…

Not that they would have to switch sides, he thought. *Public Information could make up a story out of whole cloth*.

They’d already started, naturally. A hugely-exaggerated version of the Battle of Morrison was already playing on the datanets, ending with the complete destruction of the rebel fleet and all of its crewmen. They’d have to explain the discrepancy somehow… or lie. Why not? They’d lied for hundreds of years when the truth had been deemed too dangerous to tell the public. Even the underground’s best attempts at spreading the truth could be buried under Public Information’s shower of lies.

If anyone believes it, he thought, *I would be very surprised*.

But quite a few Admirals would have taken the opportunity to exaggerate their own success… They were lucky to have Wachter, even though he was very much a two-edged sword. He could cut the Thousand Families as easily as fight for them.

He shook his head as the meeting finally came to an end, then

disengaged from the conference and walked back into his office. The latest reports from the financial analysts were on his desk, but he ignored them. Instead, he called for Marie. He needed to relax, he explained it to himself, before he did anything else. Life at the top was just too stressful.

* * *

"Do you believe the stories?"

Adeeba considered the question carefully. Public Information's claim of a decisive victory at Morrison were wildly exaggerated, she suspected, but there was probably some truth in it somewhere. By her calculations, Colin might well have reached Morrison by the time of the battle. But the rumours of a successful strike on Wolf 359 were utterly unconfirmed.

Or at least they hadn't been confirmed directly. But when the underground had checked the stock exchanges, half of the property that openly belonged to the Sandakan Family had been confiscated or frozen until debts were paid. The family had definitely taken a major hit and their only installation of note was Wolf 359. Adeeba wasn't sure how many of the rumours were actually true, but there was definitely some truth there too.

"I think the stories are reasonably believable," she said, finally. "But we couldn't have lost over two hundred superdreadnaughts in a single battle."

Gaunt snorted. "How do you figure that?"

"There are barely three hundred superdreadnaughts in the entire Empire," Adeeba said. "The Empire couldn't assemble such a force, not now. There hasn't been a fleet that large since the First Interstellar War."

Frandsen coughed. "Interesting," he said, with a wink. "But if there have been attacks this close to Earth, what do we do about them?"

Adeeba considered it. "Wait until we know more?"

Gaunt gave her a sharp look. "You don't want to take the offensive?"

"We have no way of knowing just how badly our fleet was damaged at Morrison," Adeeba said. "Sure, we can't have lost ships we don't have, but we don't know the real story. All we can do is prepare… or risk losing everything if we strike too soon."

"I wish I disagreed with you," Gaunt said. She looked around the tiny apartment. "Are you all right, here?"

Adeeba shrugged. There was barely enough room to swing a cat,

but the neighbours were quiet — Earth's inhabitants tended to ignore their fellows, unless they looked particularly weak — and there would be plenty of warning if the security forces caught on. Besides, it let her think about their planned operations in peace.

"It could be better," Frandsen said.

"Worse too," Gaunt commented. "It is actually larger than a holding cell."

She gave him a thin-lipped smirk, then continued. "We may need you to help us train for operations in orbit," she added. "Can we count on you?"

"Of course," Frandsen said. "What do you have in mind?"

Gaunt smiled, showing her teeth. "Wait and see."

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Jump completed, sir."

Colin nodded, grimly. It had taken longer than he'd expected to repair his fleet, something that had left him feeling increasingly antsy as the days wore on. His most optimistic calculations suggested that it would take at least two months for the Morrison Fleet to repair its own damage, but it was quite likely that Admiral Wachter wouldn't wait to go on the offensive. He, as much as Colin himself, understood the value of keeping the enemy off balance

"Take us towards the planet," he ordered. "But do not take us into the gravity shadow."

Tabard had been settled in the same year as Morrison itself, but it had never really taken off into a fully-developed world. The files suggested that the system's lack of a gas giant had muted investment, even though there were gas giants only a handful of light years away. By now, there were only a handful of facilities in the system, all belonging to minor families or the planetary government. Oddly, Tabard's sheer lack of importance ensured that the planet had a degree of independence others would never be able to enjoy.

Unless one happens to renounce technology altogether, Colin thought, as the squadron shook itself down into formation. *Then you would have nothing the Empire wanted, apart from a potential dumping ground for criminals.*

He looked down at the reports from his ships, grimly. Seven weeks of intensive work had repaired most of the damage, but some of the ships really needed some time in a proper shipyard. The engineers had warned him that they couldn't be overstressed or their makeshift repairs would collapse, something that Colin had found darkly amusing. People didn't go to wars to *relax* and nor did their starships. The best he could do was keep the damaged ships in the rear.

"Picking up a courier boat," the sensor officer reported. "She jumped out; destination unknown."

Probably Morrison, Colin thought. Admiral Wachter would know that Colin and a dozen rebel starships were attacking the system within moments, assuming that all went according to plan. If he took the bait… Tabard was barely four light years from Morrison. His response force could be on the way within minutes. And if the enemy didn't take the bait, Colin could at least wreck the system's facilities in the course of testing his repaired ships.

"Transmit the standard warning," he ordered. "Tell them to evacuate their facilities or die on them."

The planet came closer in the display, barely defended and utterly

vulnerable to anything larger than a destroyer. Colin wasn't surprised — and a little relieved — to see the orbital installations hastily launching lifepods, most of them rapidly dropping out of orbit and heading down towards the surface. The system CO had probably taken one look at the nine superdreadnaughts on his display and crapped himself. Maybe he'd be executed for not even firing a shot at the rebels, but at least he'd preserved his people's lives.

Alarms shrilled as new icons flickered into the system. "Contact, sir," the tactical officer said. "Two squadrons of superdreadnaughts and escorts; I say again, two squadrons of superdreadnaughts and escorts."

"Good," Colin said. He glanced at the status display — the flicker drives were powered up, ready to jump — then smiled. "Alter course towards them."

He didn't expect to win — he didn't even intend to stay in the system long enough to fire a second barrage — but it didn't matter. All that mattered was giving the enemy a fright… and accomplishing the second half of the plan.

"Send a signal to *Seeker*," he added. "She is to follow her special instructions, then rejoin the fleet later."

* * *

The spy had worked hard over the past seven weeks, much to her private annoyance. Her conditioning kept pushing her to sabotage the ship, forcing her to believe that she could get away with it without being detected. Maybe, on an Imperial Navy starship, it would have been right, but the rebels were far better trained than the average naval crew. They checked and rechecked everything, catching even the tiniest of mistakes. There was no way that outright sabotage could have gone unnoticed. Besides, the best she could do was blow up the superdreadnaught. The rebels would still have the rest of their fleet.

She had tried to distract the conditioning, which nagged at her relentlessly, by gathering data on the rebel fleet. The damage control officers were allowed to access all kinds of information, even material that would have been denied to them under normal circumstances. She'd taken it, stored it in her datapad and told herself that she was doing good. But, now the Imperial Navy had met them at Tabard, she had to send them the data. There was no way her conditioning would allow her to delay a moment longer.

Obeying the orders from her supervisor, she clambered into the tubes and crawled towards the access point. There were few crewmen who really *liked* the tubes; she'd worked hard to develop a reputation

as someone who could navigate them with ease. It ensured that her supervisor often sent her out on her own, without a partner who would notice her activities and alert the Marines. The rebels, thankfully, believed in allocating people to the sections where they could do the most good. Ironically, it should have worked in their favour, but now it worked against them.

She reached the access point, spliced in the datapad and went to work.

* * *

Colin smiled to himself as a message blinked up in his personal display. The spy had gone to work, precisely as anticipated, and was trying to upload information to the enemy. Hopefully, the spy hadn't noticed that most of the information the newcomers had been allowed to access was fake and badly understated, but it wouldn't matter. The important thing was that they now knew where they could find the spy.

"Get him," he muttered. "Hurry."

He turned his attention back to the display. The enemy fleet wasn't slowing; instead, it was actually picking up speed, as if the CO was determined to play a mad game of chicken. Or, perhaps, force his way into energy range. Colin grinned to himself, then checked the tactical display. They would be in medium range in two minutes. And then they would see…

* * *

Sidney had no problems navigating the tubes. As a native of an asteroid settlement, he was perfectly aware that sometimes he just had to crawl through tubes, even if the tubes were so thin that it seemed they were closing in on him. He clutched his stunner in one hand as he came out of the tube and turned to see a young woman fiddling with a datapad. She let out a gasp as she saw him, then grabbed for the pistol at her belt. Whatever she was, Sidney realised, she'd had some good training. She had the pistol out of her holster before he zapped her with the stunner. She let out a little gasping sound and crumpled to the metal deck.

He keyed his throatmike as he stepped forward, keeping the stunner pointed at her head. "I found her," he said, as he knelt down beside her. They'd been warned to take no chances, so he pulled her hands behind her back and secured them, then tied her ankles

together. “Just one person, Sergeant.”

“Understood,” the Sergeant said. “Are you sure she’s out of it?”

Sidney checked the girl’s vital signs. “Yes,” he said, shortly. “She’s definitely stunned.”

“Good,” the Sergeant said. “The others are on their way now. Once they’re with you, help them carry her to the brig. Leave her modifications alone. The engineers will deal with them.”

* * *

“Crewman Third Class Natasha Rosina,” Anderson’s voice said. “One of our newcomers, definitely. And she would have been in position to betray the asteroid too.”

“Understood,” Colin said. “Take care of her. I’ll see you once the battle is over.”

He closed the channel, just as the enemy ships came into range. “Lock weapons on target,” he ordered. “Fire!”

The five arsenal ships that had been pretending to be superdreadnaughts fired as one, launching over ten thousand missiles towards the enemy ships. Colin’s actual superdreadnaughts fired a moment later, adding their own weight of fire to the barrage. The enemy ships seemed to flinch as the missiles roared towards them, then returned fire. Colin allowed himself a tight smile, then gave the order. The entire fleet flickered out without further ado.

“Jump complete, sir,” the helmsman said. “We escaped without losses.”

Colin smirked. The enemy fleet had probably powered up its flicker drives too, assuming that Admiral Wachter had overridden the beancounters who whined about wear and tear on expensive machinery. In peacetime, they would have had a point. Keeping a flicker drive powered up shortened its lifespan by at least half. But now, with massive missile swarms an ever-present threat, such whining should go out the airlock.

“*Seeker* will join us later,” he said. The destroyer’s orders had been to cloak, then observe the result of the missile barrage. Colin would have preferred to believe that the enemy squadron was utterly destroyed, but he knew better than to count on it. “Stand down from battlestations; take us back to the rest of the fleet.”

He stood. “XO, you have the bridge,” he added. “Contact me as soon as we reach the fleet.”

There were five armoured Marines on duty outside the brig compartment, with two more inside. The ship’s doctor was examining a naked figure lying on a bed inside the first cell, with yet another

Marine and Anderson standing next to her. Both of the men looked concerned — and irked. The girl had spied on them for months and they'd only noticed through sheer luck.

"She's basically normal, physically," the doctor said. "No implants that I can detect, a limited amount of gene-splicing… nothing really dangerous. The only significant point is a modified gene for null-gravity environments, one that isn't catalogued in the database. It might just have come from the Beyond."

"Or it might have been devised by Imperial Intelligence," Anderson rumbled. "Something to prove her credentials."

"Perhaps," Colin said. "And no one suspected anything?"

"Her supervisor gave her a glowing report," Anderson said. "She was liked by everyone, it seems. And she had a partner, one Crewman Rogers. He refused to believe the truth when I told him."

Colin winced, feeling a moment of sympathy for the young man. It wasn't easy to form a relationship with a girl, not on an Imperial Navy starship. Below decks, life could be very hard for the women. They were not only outnumbered significantly by the men, they were often chased by their superior officers too. And the very worst ships had the female crewmen forced into prostitution… it was one of the things everyone knew happened, but did nothing to stop. Colin had won the loyalty of *Shadow's* crew by taking a stand against such gangs.

"No need to harass him," Colin said. "Check him out with a lie detector, then let him go."

"We know how she accessed the datanet now," Anderson said, changing the subject. "If she refuses to cooperate, we can duplicate it for ourselves."

The spy let out a gasp, her entire body jerking against the restraints. Colin watched, grimly, as the doctor placed an injector against her neck and shot something into her bloodstream, explaining that it was a mild sedative. It was quite possible, Colin knew, that the spy had been conditioned to commit suicide as soon as she was captured. The sedative, combined with the restraints, might make it impossible.

Her eyes jerked open. "I…"

"Relax," the doctor said. "You're safe."

Anderson grunted, unpleasantly. The doctor shot him a sharp look. There would be time for an intensive interrogation later, but for the moment they had to prevent any suicidal programming from activating. If the spy didn't believe herself to be in real danger… she jerked again, her hands straining against the restraints. Colin shook his head, but refused to turn away. There was no way the spy could believe she was *not* in danger.

The girl convulsed, then went limp. Alarms sounded as her entire body sagged. The doctor swore, then pushed another injector against her neck. But it was already too late.

"The command to commit suicide was too strong," the doctor said. There was a bitter tone in her voice. "The moment she realised she was caught, her conditioning ordered her to die."

Anderson scowled. "There was nothing you could do to save her?"

"I could have kept her permanently sedated or stuffed her into a stasis tube," the doctor snapped, tartly. "But I doubt I could have kept her awake and alive. You would probably need direct brain linkage to pull anything out of her and we don't have the equipment. And if we did, I wouldn't. It would be grossly immoral."

"Imperial Intelligence does it all the time," Anderson said.

"I rest my case," the doctor countered. She looked over at Colin. "I'll give her an autopsy, but I don't think I'll uncover anything particularly significant. There was nothing special about her, merely her brain and her forced obedience to orders."

Colin leaned forward. The girl looked so innocent, in death. "You're sure she was forced?"

"She was quite definitely conditioned," the doctor said. She shrugged, expressively. "But apart from that… we'll probably never know. She could have been captured, turned into a spy and sent back to the Beyond or she could have volunteered for the job. If she'd changed her mind later…"

Colin shivered. Conditioning would have ensured she *couldn't* have changed sides, no matter what she discovered about the Empire. She might have wanted to join the rebels, only to be held in place by her mental bondage. In the long run, it would have killed her. But until then she would have served the Empire faithfully.

His wristcom buzzed. "Admiral," the XO said, "we have returned to the fleet."

"Good," Colin said. There was no time to waste. "Start reloading the arsenal ships and our missile tubes."

He closed the channel, then looked over at Anderson. "What do you want to do with her reputation?"

"Tell everyone that she was forced into servitude," Anderson said, shortly. "Too many people liked her, really. We tell them that she was conditioned and they'll accept her as a martyr. Hell, we can turn her into another propaganda story."

Colin hesitated. He didn't like the thought of using a young woman's death for propaganda, even though they would never know just why she'd served the Empire. But then, at least they would get something out of the whole affair apart from the awareness that they'd caught one spy. Who knew how many others there were?

"Make sure you secure the datanet thoroughly," he warned. "If someone else tries to use those backdoors, I want to know about it."

"Understood," Anderson said. He took one last look at the body, then stepped backwards. "With your permission, sir, I will start spreading the word."

Colin nodded, then turned and walked out of the brig.

* * *

"*Seeker* rejoined the fleet thirty minutes after our arrival," Colin said, an hour later. "She reported that we took out three enemy superdreadnaughts and damaged two more."

"Excellent," Daria said. "And you caught the spy."

Colin nodded, looking around the conference room. Too many faces were missing. Jeremy Damiani, of course, was either a prisoner or dead. Salgak and the rest of the Geeks were on their starships; Hester and Hannelore were back on Jackson's Folly, working frantically to organise the rebellion's industrial base. If the attack on Morrison failed for a second time, all their efforts might prove futile. The Empire would have all the time it needed to launch an offensive of its own.

But they lost Wolf 359, Colin thought. The courier boat had arrived just before he'd taken the squadron to Tabard. Cordova had scored a stunning victory, one that fully justified the rebellion's faith in him. Right now, the Empire would be reeling. Entire families would be teetering on the brink of collapse. There would be no better time to resume the offensive.

"The spy's message included the claim that we were not ready to resume the offensive," Colin said. It had been tricky to make sure the spy picked up on it, but the message had been recorded and deciphered. They'd succeeded. "That is, of course, a lie."

He took a breath. "We're going back to Morrison," he said. "We have the new weapons, new tactics… and this time we will not underestimate our enemy. This is how we are going to proceed."

The plan was simple enough, but the basic equation hadn't changed. He still had to knock Morrison out before advancing into the Core Worlds, knowing that failing to do so would leave the Morrison Fleet in his rear. And he was far too aware of just what an aggressive Admiral could do with the Empire's preponderance of mobile firepower. Hell, given enough time, the Empire could cut loose entire squadrons of battlecruisers and send them to raid Colin's rear. No, there was no alternative. They had to knock Morrison out — and soon.

And Admiral Wachter would know it too.

“Go back to your ships,” he ordered, finally. “We will leave in one hour.”

Daria hesitated, waiting until the others were gone. She even waved Mariko out, although Colin was sure that the tiny girl would be waiting on the other side of the hatch. It was rare to see them apart, even though they were clearly a mismatched pair.

“Good to see you enthused again, Colin,” she said. “I was worried for a while.”

“Thank you,” Colin said, sourly. It was funny, “I just had to learn from defeat.”

“Hell, we had to do that all that time,” Daria said. “Why do you think the League is composed of bastards? Never give up, that’s our motto. Whatever happens, never give up.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Penny had never really felt *nervous* around Admiral Wachter, but she did now.

"Admiral," she said carefully, "are you sure you should be drinking?"

Admiral Wachter looked down at his glass. It held an amber-coloured liquid that probably cost more than Penny would ever make in her life. The sight bothered her; Percival had drunk too, normally before summoning Penny for a little… *fun*. But Wachter was nothing like that, was he?

"I don't know," he said. He put the glass down on the table and looked up at her. "I received orders from Earth. They want the prisoners shipped back to them, immediately."

Penny blinked in surprise. "Immediately?"

"I had them transferred to a Marine landing craft, then sent to Earth," Wachter said. "They *say* they'll honour my terms, but they don't want me to keep them. What does that suggest to you?"

Penny had known Percival far too well. "That they *don't* intend to honour your terms."

"Or that they're stalling," Wachter added. "That they think they will win the war, even though Wolf 359 is gone." He snorted. "I'm not supposed to tell you that, by the way."

"Wolf 359 is *gone*?" Penny repeated. "But… *how*?"

"The rebels pulled off a daring operation," Wachter said, shortly. "There's a security clampdown, so I don't really know anything beyond the simple fact that the shipyard is gone. And that leaves Terra Nova as the only remaining Class-III shipyard in the Empire."

It was more than just that, Penny knew. Wolf 359 had supplied everything from starship components to colony farming equipment. The sudden destruction of the facilities would trigger shortages all across the Empire, probably setting off economic shockwaves that would do real damage to the Empire's stability… if, of course, the rebels hadn't been trying to undermine it themselves. No matter what the Thousand Families believed, it wouldn't be long before the news leaked out. It probably *had* on Earth.

"They've also ordered me not to launch any offences against the rebel-held planets," Wachter added. "I think they're still trying to decide what to do."

Penny winced. The Families Council needed three to four weeks to send orders from Earth to Morrison. By the time they made up their mind and the orders reached their destination, the situation might have changed radically. The rebel fleet was still out there, as proven

by their attack on Tabard, and they clearly hadn't given up on the war. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before they came after Morrison again.

"We could win this war now, if we launched an offensive," Wachter said. "But no, we have to remain here. They're not even ordering us to detach ships to Terra Nova…"

"It *would* take three weeks to get the ships there," Penny pointed out. But he had a point. Terra Nova and Earth were the two systems the Empire could not afford to lose. Hell, if the rebels took out the shipyard orbiting Terra Nova they'd win even if they didn't occupy the system. "Or maybe they've sent orders for you to do that and they're still on their way."

Wachter snorted and reached for the glass. Penny braced herself and picked it up, moving it carefully out of reach. Wachter gave her an odd look, then withdrew his hand. Penny tried not to sigh in relief. Percival would have given her anything from a beating to summary demotion to the ranks for depriving him of his pleasures.

"It doesn't help to get drunk," she said, quietly.

"No, it doesn't," Wachter agreed. "Do you realise we also had several new arrivals from Earth?"

Penny swallowed. Wachter had requested repair crews and more warships. He'd received Blackshirts and additional security officers. In theory, the Blackshirts were there to provide prisoner escorts, but Penny suspected that the truth was a little darker. If the Thousand Families decided they could disperse with the Admiral's services, they could order their conditioned servants to remove him and they would obey.

"Yes, sir," she said. She took a long breath. "Do you remember what I said to you?"

"I think you shouldn't say that again," Wachter said. "You know why I can't take over the Empire."

Because you're loyal, Penny thought. It wasn't something she really understood. She'd given her loyalty to Percival, not the Empire as a whole. But both of them had betrayed her, Percival by treating her as a slave and the Empire by searching for a scapegoat for the disasters in Sector 117. Wachter, on the other hand, deserved her loyalty. And yet she didn't understand how he could be loyal to the Empire.

But she had read his file. He was minor aristocracy. If the Empire collapsed into outright civil war, his family would either be absorbed or destroyed by the other families. Could it really be so simple? Could his loyalty be nothing more than calculation? And yet he'd shown loyalty to his subordinates, purged officers — no matter their connections — who had abused their positions and, by doing so, had alienated his own superiors. He was, she decided, a very strange man.

“I think you should get a good night’s sleep,” she said. There was an old joke about a personal aide being nothing more than a nursemaid. But being a nursemaid was better than being a whore. “I’ll alert you if something changes…”

Alarms sounded, echoing through the giant starship. “You and your big mouth,” Wachter said. He reached under the sofa and removed an injector, which he pressed against his arm and triggered. The alcohol would be swept from his system within seconds. “Go to the CIC. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Penny nodded and left the room. The CIC was right next to the Admiral’s quarters, allowing her to enter the compartment within seconds. A couple of officers gave her odd glances and she felt her cheeks heat — they’d probably assumed that she was the Admiral’s lover as well as his assistant — but she ignored them, choosing instead to concentrate on the display. A number of red icons had appeared, alarmingly close to the planet.

“Defence network powering up now,” the tactical officer reported. “All starships are reporting their status…”

“No need to panic,” Wachter’s voice said, from behind her. “We saw them off once and we can do it again.”

Penny turned to smile at him, then shook her head in amazement. Wachter had changed his jacket, shaved his chin and donned his cap, within barely five minutes. He *looked* an Admiral now, she decided, as he moved up to stand beside her. She flushed as he winked at her, then studied the display. The enemy fleet was building up speed.

“The report from the spy was clearly in error,” Wachter said. “Unless, of course, half of those superdreadnaughts are drones.”

He quirked his eyebrows at Penny, inviting her to comment. “They’re… they’re not having any problems keeping up,” Penny said. “So they’re either real superdreadnaughts or smaller starships pretending to be superdreadnaughts.”

“Very good, Captain,” Wachter said. He looked over at the tactical officer. “Launch an extra spread of drones. I want to see the letters on their hull.”

Penny nodded in understanding. Drones and smaller ships could use ECM to pretend to be something they weren’t, but they’d never be able to fool visual observation. The only question was if the drones would survive long enough to get close enough to use optical sensors. But then, the way the rebel fleet was just charging at the planet, it seemed they’d definitely have their chance.

“Concentrate our own fleet in blocking position, but keep us within the orbital defence network’s envelope,” Wachter ordered. There were no fancy tricks this time. The rebels would have to engage the loyalists within the gravity shadow or try to lay siege to the

planet. “And then prepare to engage the enemy.”

* * *

Colin watched, as dispassionately as he could, as the enemy ships launched their first set of recon drones. After what he’d done at Tabard, he wasn’t too surprised that the enemy was trying to make sure the squadrons of superdreadnaughts bearing down on him were actually *real*. They’d also have to wonder just how much of what the spy had sent them was true. It should keep them busy for a while, Anderson had said, but Colin had his doubts. At worst, they could simply draw the right conclusions through analysing the previous battle.

“Engage the drones with point defence,” he ordered. The Morrison fleet was clenching up, like a man trying desperately to hide something in his fist. The enemy was disdaining tactical flexibility, daring him to come after them and enter the gravity shadow. If they knew about Wolf 359, and they probably did, they’d be leery of taking *any* losses. “Make them work to get a look at us.”

He studied the reports from his own drones and scowled. Most of the enemy ships seemed to have been repaired, although it was difficult to be sure. They’d played games with IFF signals, just like the rebels. He looked up at the main display, silently calculating the odds in his head. If the new weapons worked, they might just have a chance to do real damage to the Empire’s fleet without taking heavy losses of their own.

And if they don’t work as advertised, Colin thought, *we will still have a chance*.

“Open hailing frequencies,” he ordered.

“Channel open, sir,” the communications officer said.

“Admiral Wachter, this is Colin Walker,” Colin said. “You are outnumbered and outgunned — and you are loyal to the Empire. Surrender now and help us rebuild the edifice into something we can all be proud of. We guarantee good treatment of your officers and men, even the ones who don’t want to join us.”

He allowed his voice to darken. “But if you don’t surrender,” he added, “we will have no alternative, but take the system by force.”

It wouldn’t have worked, Colin suspected, on any other officer. But Admiral Wachter genuinely cared for his men. Perhaps, just perhaps, he’d see reason.

* * *

Penny cursed inwardly the moment she heard the damned message. Admiral Wachter had enemies, men and women who suspected the worst of anyone who was actually *competent*. If they heard the rebel message, one of them might decide to try to remove Wachter now, before it was too late. And yet, if the Morrison Fleet lost its commander in the midst of a battle, the rebels would almost certainly win.

"No response," Wachter ordered, tiredly. "Launch gunboats. I want every one of those ships locked down."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

"Those superdreadnaughts look real," Wachter commented. Penny looked down at the reports from the drones, then nodded in agreement. "Which means that the information we were sent is probably all lies intended to mislead us."

He smirked. "Good thing we were told not to launch any offences, right?"

Penny had to chuckle. If they'd taken everything in the spy's message at face value, it would have seemed the perfect time to launch a counteroffensive, which would have left Morrison weakened when the rebels returned to the system. As it was, aristocratic indecision and bureaucratic stonewalling had worked in their favour. It would have been laughable if it hadn't been so lucky.

Wachter turned his attention back to the tactical display. "General orders; target the superdreadnaughts — and only the superdreadnaughts. Everything else can wait."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

"The rebels are locking weapons on our ships," the sensor officer snapped. Red lights flared across the display as the rebels locked on. "They're preparing to fire!"

Wachter and Penny exchanged glances. "Interesting," Wachter mused. "They're out of range. And they can't flicker into range, not within the gravity shadow. I wonder what they have in mind."

He turned back to the tactical officer. "Bring our point defence to full alert," he ordered. "If they have extended their missile ranges, I want to be ready."

Penny wasn't sure she believed it. The problem with extended missile ranges was the same as firing missiles from standard extreme range. Enemy point defence systems had longer to track the missiles and plan out their interceptions while the missiles were on their way. It was odd for the rebels to do something *stupid*… and firing missiles from extreme range would be stupid. Unless, of course, they had boosted their missile swarms by an order of magnitude. A few hundred thousand missiles would seriously damage the fleet, no matter when and where they were fired.

“True,” Wachter said, when she said it out loud. “And the rebels have never been stupid. And that means they have something up their sleeves.”

* * *

“Experimental missiles are locked on target,” the tactical officer said. “Set one is ready for launch.”

Colin nodded, grimly. The Geeks had worked wonders, as always, but they had only been able to produce a few hundred of the experimental missiles. Even their modified ECM projectors only numbered in the tens. Given time, they could probably produce thousands of them… but by then the Empire would have rebuilt its shipyards and started churning out new superdreadnaughts. And the experimental missiles wouldn’t be enough to tip the balance.

“Fire,” he ordered.

There was a second disadvantage with the experimental missiles; they were over twice the size of the standard missile. They couldn’t be fired from internal tubes, they had to be mounted on the hull. And if someone managed to land a shot on the hull before the missiles were launched… Colin had considered the risks, then chosen to accept them, but he hadn’t been too pleased about it. There were just too many unknowns involved. If he’d had his way, there would have been months of tests before the systems were deployed in combat.

The superdreadnaught shuddered, gently, as the first barrage was launched. It looked pitiful compared to the massive barrages both the rebels and the loyalists had deployed in the past, but it was fired from well outside standard missile range. The missiles picked up speed rapidly as they flashed towards their targets, advancing on the Imperial Navy starships with deadly intent. Their size made them easier targets, Colin noted dispassionately. The Imperial Navy had to be looking forward to wiping the entire barrage out .. unless, of course, they realised there was a trick. Admiral Wachter would definitely realise that there was a trick.

But what could he do about it?

“Three minutes to scatter, sir,” the tactical officer reported. “Seeker heads are updating their own programming constantly, as per projections.”

Colin gritted his teeth. There were good reasons against building anything *too* smart, he knew, horror stories that dated all the way back to the days before the Empire. An AI smart enough to think on its own might start asking why it had to take orders from the fleshy humans surrounding it — or, even if it didn’t start acting

malevolently, it might ride roughshod over human interests and concerns to get what it wanted. But the Geeks didn't seem to care about the risks. Salgak had even talked about the possibilities of using AI to reform the Empire's economy and make the jump to a post-scarcity society.

"The Thousand Families have really buried quite a lot of possibilities," he'd said, his implants clicking and whirring as he spoke. "And we don't have the resources to explore them ourselves, not out here. But when we rule the Empire, we will have the resources to utterly transform the existing economic paradigm."

Colin hadn't been sure what to make of it. Utterly destroying the Thousand Families — if it could be done without destroying the Empire as well — seemed a good thing, but who knew if the new universe would actually be better than the old. He'd said as much and Salgak had demanded to know, rather rudely, why he'd even bothered to rebel if he was scared of change. Even if the rebels won, they couldn't change everything as long as they accepted the old order. But technology could change the entire face of humanity.

He pushed the thought aside as the missiles reached the edge of the enemy's point defence envelope.

"Scattering now, sir," the tactical officer said.

* * *

Penny didn't understand what she was seeing — and that meant it *had* to be a trick. The enemy missiles were colossal, easily targeted by the point defence network. None of them would last long enough to attack anything, even the gunboats at the edge of Wachter's formation. Hell, it was almost as if the enemy *wanted* the missiles destroyed.

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, "the missile drives just cut out. Completely."

Wachter swore. "Bring active sensors to full power," he ordered. "Start sweeping space for targets."

Penny frowned. Wachter understood… but she didn't. The missiles might be following ballistic trajectories, yet that would just make them even easier targets. It was unlikely that the active sensors would have difficulty tracking them, while even if they *did* have problems the computers could still predict where the missiles would be…

And then the display suddenly spangled with red icons. *Hundreds* of red icons, right on top of them.

"Carrier missiles," Wachter commented, as the point defence

network hastily recalculated its firing solutions. “I’ve heard it theorized, but never actually put into practice.”

Penny understood, too late. The enemy might as well have fired a barrage at point-blank range. They were already slipping through the point defence, roaring past the smaller ships and falling on the superdreadnaughts like wolves on a lamb. *General Clive* went to full alert as four missiles slammed into her shields, rocking her violently; four other superdreadnaughts were less lucky. Two of them took serious damage and a third exploded into a radioactive fireball. The fourth lost her external racks to a lucky hit.

And then the tactical officer swore out loud.

“Report,” Wachter snapped. “Calmly, if possible.”

“Admiral,” the tactical officer said, “we just lost the point defence network!”

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, "their point defence network has collapsed."

Colin allowed himself a tight smile. The Geeks had been right; they'd told him that the network could be brought down, with the right modifications to the ECM drones. Right now, every starship orbiting Morrison had been forced to rely on its own defences, rather than fighting as part of a group. They were terrifyingly exposed to his fire.

"Take us into missile range," he ordered. "Then fire at will."

* * *

Penny watched in horror as the enemy launched a second barrage of missiles. The point defence network had collapsed completely, forcing the techs to shut it down and then reboot the system, knowing all the while that the enemy were pressing their advantage. It would take too long to reboot the system completely, but they had no choice. Without it, they were doomed.

"Recall the gunboats, order them to provide targeting solutions," Wachter ordered. But she knew it was just a stopgap at best. As long as the network was down, their ability to operate as a unified force was non-existent. "And then order the orbital facilities to open fire, even at extreme range."

Penny nodded. The enemy arsenal ships, having fired their missiles, were retreating back towards the edge of the gravity shadow while the superdreadnaughts were firing a third barrage. Admiral Wachter's ships had returned fire, naturally, but the enemy point defence network was up and running. They'd be able to hold themselves together far longer than the Morrison Fleet.

"And warn all hands to brace for impact," Wachter ordered. "This is going to be bad."

He was right, Penny saw, as the first wave of missiles crashed down on the superdreadnaughts. Without the network, various ships went after the same targets while other missiles were left alone to slam into vulnerable superdreadnaughts. Shields flickered, then failed, leaving the ships defenceless. One by one, the superdreadnaughts began to take heavy damage. Beyond them, even the orbital fortifications came under fire.

She gritted her teeth as the enemy fired yet another barrage. Half of the defending cruisers and destroyers were already gone and most

of the remainder had taken damage. The Morrison Fleet, once so capable, had been smashed. Wachter gave her a sidelong look, then shrugged. He knew when the battle was lost.

"Hold fire," he ordered. "Contact the rebels and offer them our surrender."

Penny braced herself. It was possible that the rebels weren't in the mood to take prisoners — or that they wouldn't simply get the message until it was too late. Messages could be lost easily in the chaos of a battle, everyone knew. And then there were the Blackshirts from Earth. Would they tamely accept an order to surrender?

"The rebels are holding fire," the tactical officer said.

"Picking up a message," the communications officer added. "They're ordering us to drop our remaining shields and shut down our drives."

"Make it so," Wachter ordered. "I…"

The security officer swore. "Admiral, the Marines report that some of the Blackshirts have turned on them," he said. "They're advancing towards the bridge and CIC."

"Seal the compartment," Wachter ordered. "Alert the Marines on the orbital fortifications. They are *not* to allow them to fall into anyone's hands."

Penny unbuttoned her holster. She'd spent enough time practicing at the firing range to qualify for a marksman badge, although she hadn't bothered to actually apply. It would have appeared in her file and warned potential enemies that she could actually hit her target. A quick check revealed that *someone* had taken down the internal security system. The Blackshirts and their allies might just make it to the bridge after all.

"Contact the rebels," Wachter ordered. Somehow, he still managed to sound calm. "Inform them of our situation and request assistance."

Penny stared at him. "You think they'll help?"

"If they want the planet's facilities, they'll help," Wachter said. He nodded towards the status board. Several orbital fortresses had dropped out entirely, suggesting that the Blackshirts had taken control. "They won't have any choice."

"Director Smyth is broadcasting on all channels," the communications officer said, suddenly. "He's accusing you of treason and ordering all loyal officers to take you into custody and resume the battle."

Penny shook her head in disbelief. She had little regard for Imperial Intelligence's intelligence, but they had to realise the battle was lost. If they hadn't been in the gravity shadow, they could have flickered out and rebooted the network at leisure, yet they were

definitely trapped. And now, with shields and drives gone, they would be sitting ducks if they tried to resume the fight. The rebels would blow them away within seconds.

"Admiral," she said, very quietly, "shouldn't we neutralise the ships? And the orbital facilities?"

Wachter hesitated, considering it. "Only if we lose control to the Blackshirts," he said. "And only then."

Penny lifted her eyebrows. "Sir," she said, "that will put more superdreadnaughts in rebel hands…"

"All badly damaged," Wachter reminded her. "One way or another, the war will be over by the time the rebels can put the superdreadnaughts back into service."

"I don't understand," Penny said, but she knew that was a lie. If the rebels won, there was no point in destroying starships and facilities out of spite. The Empire would still need to rebuild, even if the Thousand Families were gone. And Wachter was loyal to the Empire. "I…"

She leaned forward. "It's been a honour, sir," she added. "And thank you."

Wachter nodded in silent understanding.

Together, they prepared themselves for the worst.

* * *

"They're asking for help," the communications officer said, surprised. "Half of the fortresses seem to be in a state of mutiny."

Colin wasn't too surprised. Whatever authority the Thousand Families had granted Admiral Wachter would come with caveats attached. It was probable that he didn't have complete control over the planetary defences, which might well remain under someone else's control… someone more known for loyalty than competence. And the Blackshirts rarely surrendered, knowing what their fate would be at rebel hands. Colin had liberated a dozen worlds controlled by the Blackshirts… and very few of them had survived long enough to be interned.

But it was a major problem. It seemed as though a civil war was breaking out on Morrison, which meant… what? If he inserted his Marines, who knew which side they were meant to be supporting? Or should he try to keep them out of the fight and wait for a victor to emerge? But the longer it took, the greater the chance the loyalists would manage to purge and reboot their systems and then he would have to punch his way through the rest of the defences.

He looked over at Anderson. "Thoughts?"

Anderson seemed surprised to be asked. “The Marines will have to be very careful,” he said, finally. “If the Blackshirts have the support of local security officers and embedded agents, it will be very hard to tell friend from foe.”

“They’re not our friends,” Colin commented, grimly. “They’re… surrendering, at best.”

He wondered, absently, just how far they could trust *anyone* who had served under Admiral Wachter. The most loyal rebels — as if that wasn’t a contradiction in terms — had been the victims of their commanding officers, not the trusted subordinates. Colin himself might not have rebelled if his ambitions had been permissible, within the system. But Admiral Wachter had worked hard to get the loyalty of his crewmen. How many of them could be trusted to join the Shadow Fleet?

Maybe we can get Admiral Wachter to join us, he thought. *We might be lucky*.

“Send the Marines,” he ordered. “I want them to concentrate on the superdreadnaughts, then the orbital fortresses. The planet can wait.”

* * *

“The Marines at the hatch are under attack,” the communications officer reported. She’d taken up the job of trying to coordinate the internal defence of the starship, while the tactical and security officers took up position to defend the CIC. “They can’t…”

A dull thump echoed through the hatch. Penny looked at Wachter, who held his pistol in one hand as if he knew how to use it. Not all of the officers had bothered to qualify, Penny had discovered to her alarm; pistol shooting wasn’t a skill naval officers were encouraged to develop. But there was no alternative. The hatch started to glow as the Blackshirts began to cut their way into the CIC. By Penny’s calculations, they would be through in five minutes at most.

“Take your mask,” she ordered. “Everyone who doesn’t have a weapon, move into the Admiral’s office.”

Wachter gave her an odd smile. “Were you a Marine in a previous life?”

“Just common sense,” Penny said. She wasn’t about to admit that she’d planned for a mutiny ever since hearing about the mutinies at Jackson’s Folly. Percival had made so many enemies that she was still surprised no one had risen up against him by the time Camelot had fallen to the rebels. “And they might be safer there.”

Wachter shook his head. Penny nodded, grimly. Anyone who had had contact with Admiral Wachter would be considered a suspect at best, an outright traitor at worst. And besides, Blackshirts were known for committing atrocities in the heat of combat. The Empire encouraged that trait, believing that terror helped keep people in line, even though it tended to result in destroyed targets and dead rebels. But then, the Empire wasn't known for caring about enemy lives.

The hatch blew open; dark-clad figures stormed into the CIC. Penny opened fire at once, joined by Wachter and the other three officers with personal weapons. The Blackshirts toppled backwards — they hadn't even bothered to don proper armour — but there were more of them behind the first group. One of them threw a gas grenade into the compartment, which exploded and released a cloud of yellow gas. Penny prayed that the mask would be sufficient to keep it out as she kept firing, driving the Blackshirts back. But there seemed to be no shortage of Blackshirts…

The internal security systems must have failed completely, she thought. *Or perhaps they'd been subverted long ago*.

She felt her weapon grow warm in her hand and shuddered. Plasma weapons had a nasty tendency to overheat and then explode with stunning force. But there was nothing else to use… and besides, it might just be cleaner to die in an explosion than what she would undergo if the Blackshirts took her into custody again. She'd barely survived one interrogation. She knew she was unlikely to survive a second.

"Keep firing," Wachter said, quietly. "We'll hold them back as long as we can."

* * *

Sidney led the way out of the shuttle and into the enemy superdreadnaught, his suit's systems already trying to access the ship's internal security processors. Unsurprisingly, they didn't respond; someone had either locked the systems or simply destroyed them. It didn't matter, he decided, as his HUD showed the shortest path to the CIC. They had to get there before it was too late.

No one tried to block their path as they smashed their way through two sealed airlocks, not until they reached Officer Country. Four Blackshirts stood there, firing at a group of Imperial Navy Marines who seemed to be trying to counterattack. For a moment, the situation was so surreal that Sidney almost started laughing, before the Sergeant pushed his way forward and spoke briefly to the Imperial Navy Marines. The Marines fell back a moment later, allowing the

other Marines to advance forward.

The Sergeant barked orders. Sidney launched a grenade towards the enemy position, then joined the charge as the grenade exploded, knocking the Blackshirts out of their post. The Marines smashed through them and charged up the corridor, ignoring the handful of bullets that pinged off their armour. Sidney guessed that the Blackshirts had had to organise their mutiny on the fly. They hadn't bothered to find weapons capable of burning through powered combat armour.

They crashed into the Blackshirts attacking the CIC and opened fire. There were no survivors.

* * *

Penny let out a sigh of relief as she carefully lowered her weapon to the deck, then stood upright, careful to keep her hands in view. The rebels might take her prisoner, but they wouldn't treat her as badly as the Blackshirts would have done… assuming, of course, they didn't know what had happened to their missing personnel, the ones who had become POWs. But even if they did decide to retaliate by butchering prisoners, it wouldn't be as bad as being tortured first…

The rebel Marines were surprisingly gentle. One of them frisked her — she couldn't help cringing away from his armoured hands, knowing that one mistake would break bones — and then cuffed her, before leaving her to sit on the deck. They were a little tougher with the other officers, then the crewmen who had hidden in the office. Penny found herself staring down at the deck, wondering what would happen now. The rebels had offered their prisoners choices in the past, but would they do that now?

It was nearly forty minutes before she was helped to her feet, then pushed gently towards the hatch. Outside, it looked like a warzone. Blackshirts, Marines and ordinary crewmen had fought savagely, often leaving their bodies on the blackened and scorched deck. Penny knew that the damage was mostly cosmetic, unlike some of the damage inflicted by enemy missiles, but she couldn't help feeling bitter. They'd worked so hard to get *General Clive* up to marginally acceptable standards, during the flight from Earth, and now the ship had been damaged again.

In the shuttlebay, she wasn't surprised when Wachter and herself were separated. There was a brief conversation between two of the rebel Marines, then they were helped into a shuttlecraft and firmly strapped down. The shuttle took off moments later, heading back into space. Penny tried to see if there was still fighting going on, but the

naked eye revealed nothing. By now, surely the Blackshirts would have lost control of the fortresses…

She shook her head. One way or the other, it was no longer her concern.

A rebel officer met them as they were helped off the shuttle. “For the moment, we’ve assigned you guest quarters,” he said, “if you will give us your parole. If not…”

He left the statement unfinished, but Penny could guess. If they refused to agree not to cause harm to the rebels while they were on the ship, there were more unpleasant places they could be held. The brig, for example, or a refitted cargo hold. It certainly wouldn’t be very comfortable, even if the rebels didn’t go out of their way to make it unpleasant.

“We will give your our parole,” Wachter said. “And thank you.”

Penny said nothing as they were escorted through the ship’s corridors to a small cabin, probably once used by one of Stacy Roosevelt’s allies. It was large enough to house them both comfortably, even though it had clearly been stripped of anything valuable or dangerous. The rebel cut her hands free, warned them that Marines would be posted outside the door, then shoved them both into the room. Penny rubbed at her wrists as the hatch slammed closed, leaving them alone.

“Get some rest,” Wachter ordered. “I’ll have the sofa.”

“Yes, sir,” Penny said. God alone knew what the rebels would want with them. They’d better catch up on their sleep while they could. “And sir…”

Wachter tapped his lips, silently indicating that they were probably being observed.

After a moment, Penny nodded and walked into the bedroom, leaving him alone.

* * *

It took longer than Colin had expected to secure Morrison, even though the Blackshirts had clearly lost whatever cohesion they’d had after the Imperial Intelligence structure had been overrun. In the end, however, the stations had been secured, the superdreadnaughts had been evacuated and the remaining starships had been moved to a safe distance. Given enough time, according to the engineers, they could all be pressed back into service. But not soon enough, they’d added, to make a real difference.

“We might need to jump out again, once the orbital fortifications are secure,” Colin commented to his XO. “They’ll certainly try to

recover Morrison."

The XO smiled. "With what?"

Colin had to admit he had a point. The Imperial Navy had concentrated its forces at Earth, Morrison and Terra Nova. Now, one of those fleets had been shattered and the other two were tied down. *And* they were close enough together that one of them could probably be lured out of place, with a little effort.

"True," he agreed. He looked up at the display for a long moment. "Do we have an updated repair estimate?"

"Four days," the XO said. They'd only taken minimal damage from the battle, thankfully. "And then we can resume the offensive."

Colin nodded. By any standards, it had been the most one-sided battle since the end of the First Interstellar War — and yet the same trick wouldn't work twice. Earth's defenders would know to expect their point defence systems to be jammed and prime their systems to overcome it. Earth would be a far harder nut to crack.

"Good," he said. "Once we return to the RV point, I want you to bring our two aristocratic guests back onboard. I want a few words with them."

"Yes, sir," the XO said.

"And have all of the prisoners moved to the planet's surface," Colin added. "We can't afford to trust them, not now."

He scowled. It had become clear, very quickly, that some of the rebel POWs *had* been abused. The files had been destroyed, though, and no one who had personal knowledge of the abuse victims had been captured. But Colin suspected that anyone who hadn't been held on Morrison itself had been shipped back to Earth.

"And then I need a few words with the Admiral too," he said. "I want to know which side he's on."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Colin had not been taught to have respect for senior officers. Most of the Imperial Navy's officers were appointed for loyalty, connections or incompetence, not anything Colin could have respected them for possessing. Even before Percival had betrayed him, Colin had never really *respected* him. The man's flaws had been too obvious, even to someone who had hoped to use him for his own advantage.

But Admiral Wachter was different. Colin hesitated outside the hatch, feeling an odd mixture of nervousness and admiration. If he'd served under such a man, he had asked himself, would he have ever been driven to mutiny? And, if he had never been driven to mutiny, would the Empire just have continued expanding outwards until it collapsed under its own weight? Would no one have stood up and said *enough*?

He pressed his hand against the sensor, opening the hatch. The Marine guard nodded at him, then stepped aside as the hatch opened, allowing Colin to step into the compartment. It had once belonged to one of Stacy Roosevelt's aides — Colin had never been entirely certain what the man had done for her, but he'd accepted exile with almost indecent speed — and had been swept of anything that might be dangerous or valuable. But at least it wasn't a cell in the brig, Colin told himself, as Admiral Wachter sat up on the sofa. It could have been a great deal worse.

"Commander Walker," Wachter said.

"*Admiral* Walker," Colin countered, recognising the verbal gambit. To let it pass would be to implicitly recognise the Empire as the source of all promotion. "I trust that the quarters are acceptable?"

"It would be nice to have something to read," Wachter said. "Your people took out the workstation and everything else."

"I'll have some books dug up and sent to you," Colin assured him. He took a seat facing the sofa and smiled at Wachter. "You fought well."

"Thank you," Wachter said. "So did you."

Colin glanced up as the hatch leading into the bedroom opened, revealing a woman with long blonde hair and a face that seemed oddly nervous. It reminded Colin of the poor bastards they'd rescued from Imperial Intelligence, back when Camelot had fallen. They'd twitched nervously too after spending months having the Mind Techs probing their brains. The woman, according to the files, was the person Admiral Percival had chosen to replace him. It didn't look as though she had enjoyed the experience.

She sat down next to Wachter and stared at Colin, unable to quite

meet his eyes. Colin smiled, inwardly. She might not know it herself, but she had one hell of a crush on the Admiral, even though they weren't orienting on one another like lovers. Nor was she cringing away, as she might well have done for Percival. Somehow, Colin doubted that it was love that had lured her into Percival's clutches. More like intensive pressure to open her legs for the man who could save or damn her career with a single word.

Bastard, Colin thought. But Percival was on a penal world, assuming he had survived. Colin wouldn't have put money on him surviving more than a few days. There was no point in dwelling on his fate.

"We won the battle," he said, shortly. "It is our intention to move on to Earth as soon as we have patched up the damage."

Wachter said nothing. Nor did his aide.

"I have a question," Colin said. "Why *are* you loyal to the Empire?"

"The Empire is not perfect," Wachter said. "But what would happen to humanity *without* it?"

His voice was calm and reasonable. "There would be chaos," he said. "Old disputes would lead to civil war, the economy would fragment, the Imperial Navy would be broken up… no, we *need* the Empire."

"But the Empire has committed millions of atrocities to keep its power," Colin pointed out, struggling to keep his voice calm. "Lives have been ruined just for daring to question the way things are. People have been destroyed merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He remembered Hester and shuddered. She'd been captured, abused, raped and then sentenced to a penal colony, just for daring to seek independence for her homeworld. And her story was far from unique. God alone knew how many people had been killed by the security forces, or sentenced to penal worlds and abandoned to die there. Hester had merely been lucky enough to be rescued before she could be dropped to the surface. And then there were the independent worlds that had been swept out of existence because the Empire wanted their land. What had Jackson's Folly done to deserve being annexed by the Empire?

Wachter looked down at the deck for a long moment. "I didn't say the system was *perfect*."

Colin indicated Penny. "And what about her?"

He pressed on before Wachter could say a word. "She had nothing to do with the mutiny or Admiral Percival's ham-handed response," he said. "But she was still interrogated badly, just so they could find a scapegoat for the whole affair. What did she do to deserve *that*?"

"Nothing," Wachter said. He met Colin's eyes, holding them. "And what is the point of this discussion?"

"Join us," Colin said, simply.

"To destroy the Empire?"

"To reform it," Colin said. "The Empire is dying — it was dying even before I launched the first mutiny. You know that to be true, I think. The Thousand Families were running out of worlds to annex, their economic system was threatening to collapse and they were starting to turn on each other. It might have fallen apart completely by now if I hadn't given them a common enemy. Even if we were to surrender tomorrow, the Empire wouldn't survive the next few decades."

"A lot can happen in a decade," Wachter pointed out, smoothly.

"Not in the Empire," Colin said. "The Thousand Families will start fighting each other; their subordinates will start considering how best to take advantage of the chaos. Worlds will struggle for independence, independent freighters will seek to replace the authorised shipping lines. All of the Empire's victims, the abused and exploited, will rise up and demand their freedom. The Empire will rip itself apart."

He leaned forward. "You have a point," he admitted. "Humanity's unity is important. But, right now, there is no unity left. The Empire holds the human race together by force. Sooner or later, that force will prove insufficient to handle the task.

"We can reform the Empire if we take power now," he insisted. "End the worst of the abuses, reform the economy, purge the Imperial Navy of the patronage networks that prevent competent and far-seeing officers from rising to positions of authority… we can save humanity's unity. But if we fail to reform the Empire, the results will be disastrous for humanity."

"You'd weaken us," Wachter pointed out.

"We're already weak," Colin countered. "Tell me something. What do you think would happen if we ran into a peer power, *now*?"

He saw Wachter's wince and smiled, inwardly. The Empire had no peer, not since the First Interstellar War. Their last war with an alien race had been almost pitifully small compared to the First Interstellar War — or Colin's rebellion. But if the Empire *had* run into a peer power, one that actually *maintained* its starships, the war would have been lost very quickly. There would have been no time to repair the effects of years of stagnation on the Imperial Navy…

Colin had read the reports from Morrison. If the rebels had attacked the planet with a squadron of superdreadnaughts, just after the start of the rebellion, they might well have won outright. The same could be said for Earth. Wachter had worked miracles in getting the Morrison Fleet up and running, even though it had earned him the

hatred of almost all of the patronage networks. But if the Empire had run into a peer power, the results would have been disastrous.

"You know just how badly the Empire treats everyone," Colin added, smoothly. "Why not help us reform the system? It might help it to survive."

He glanced briefly at Penny. Just how much influence did she have over the Admiral? She could easily have been abandoned to the tender mercies of Imperial Intelligence or merely discharged from the Imperial Navy. And Wachter would have been free to choose his own aide. Could she help talk him into joining the rebels? Or…

One death is a tragedy, Colin remembered, feeling a twinge of guilt. *A million is a statistic*.

The thought made him shudder. *He* had known, intellectually, that the Empire was far from perfect. But it hadn't been until Percival had used him, then discarded him that he'd really seen the Empire for what it was. And yet he'd still been driven partly by personal ambition. It had taken Hester and her comrades to change him into a full revolutionary…

But what would change *Wachter's* mind? How loyal was he, really? He came from minor aristocracy, which gave him a stake in maintaining the system. But he had to know that the system was rotten to the core… and that it was on the verge of collapse, with or without the rebels. If he understood that, perhaps he would understand the need to take power quickly…

Or would what had happened to Penny be more *real* for him?

"I have a proposal," he said. "If we win the war, if we take control of Earth and the levers of power, join us then."

Wachter smiled. "Why *then*?

"You are admired and respected by naval officers on both sides," Colin said. It was true enough. "If you joined us, it would make the transition easier…"

"And prevent a second round of mutinies," Wachter commented.

"Quite," Colin agreed. "The officers who would be capable of launching a mutiny would understand that we didn't intend to purge them, while we *did* intend to purge the incompetent and the politically-connected."

"Not all of the connected are incompetent," Wachter pointed out. "Or am I incompetent?"

"True," Colin agreed. "But you can help us sort out the competent from the incompetent."

He smiled. "For the moment, your war is over," he said. "I won't force you to make up your mind now. But when we win, if you truly believe in human unity, you could help us reform and shore up the crumbling Empire. Because the alternative, as you pointed out, is

chaos."

"True enough," Wachter agreed.

Colin looked at him for a long moment, then rose to his feet. "For what it's worth," he added, "you're the only senior officer who's ever managed to impress me. I'd like to have you on my side.

"I know it wasn't your fault that the POWs were sent back to Earth," he added, after a moment. "I don't blame you for that, Admiral. But you might want to think about what it means if your word can be discarded so easily."

"I know," Wachter said, tiredly.

Penny looked up at Colin. "And what happens," she asked in a very small voice, "if we refuse to join you?"

"It depends," Colin said. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of pity. A full interrogation could leave its victim a trembling wreck. Penny's medical file had suggested that she had been lucky to survive without brain damage. As it was, she might need medical treatment in the very near future. "For the moment, you'll stay here. Later, we can intern you, if you refuse to join us, then discharge you after we win the war. I'd prefer to avoid purging people who only did their duty."

He allowed it to sink in for a long moment. Admiral Wachter had saved other returnees from Imperial Intelligence, but he wouldn't be so lucky himself, not if he returned. The Thousand Families had plotted to kill him, even as they had tried to make use of his skills. Colin had read the secret orders sent to the Blackshirts. When Director Smyth gave the word, they had to kill the Admiral and his entire command staff. And they would have done it even if Wachter had won the Second Battle of Morrison. They had decided to dispose of him before he could become a threat to their power.

"I'll have some books sent in," he said. "And…"

Colin shrugged and walked towards the hatch, which hissed open at his approach. He turned and nodded goodbye, then walked through the hatch and out into the corridor. Once the hatch was closed, Colin walked down towards the second suite. Gwendolyn and Pompey Cicero had been brought back onboard just after the Fall of Morrison. Neither of them, according to their escorts, had seemed very happy with their lot.

His lips twitched. Gwendolyn had spent her time trying to seduce everyone, male and female, who crossed her path, while Pompey had just read his way through countless technical manuals and cheap novels. Colin hadn't been sure if that was typical behaviour or if they were merely biding their time, although there were plenty of horror stories about how the aristocratic youths behaved in the High City. But in the end, it didn't matter. He didn't have any other pipeline back to the Thousand Families.

"Good afternoon," he said, as he stepped into the suite without knocking. "I trust that you find the quarters acceptable?"

Gwendolyn smiled at him, charmingly. "All the more acceptable for having such a handsome man entering them," she said. She crossed her legs, drawing his attention to the long slit in her kimono. "Are you going to be staying long?"

Colin felt himself flush. Her sexuality was a weapon, he knew, which didn't stop it being terrifyingly effective. He sat down hard, then scowled at her when she started to stand up. It was hard to believe that the sex kitten facing him was the same person as the hard-headed Ambassador who'd spoken to him earlier, but she was *good* at pretending. The Marines had reported, not without a certain amount of embarrassment, that she'd tried hard to present them with their ideal woman. If there had been one guard assigned to her, they'd concluded, Gwendolyn would have wrapped him around her little finger by now.

"*You* won't be," Colin said. He allowed a hint of triumph to enter his voice. "We have just successfully occupied Morrison."

The sex kitten vanished, to be replaced by a sharp-eyed persona. "Congratulations," Gwendolyn said, darkly. "What can we do for you *then*?"

Colin smiled, recognising the double meaning. "In the interests of avoiding further bloodshed, I'd like you to take a message back to your superiors," he said. "Tell them… that we would be interested in a peaceful transfer of power."

"I believe the Family Head would also be interested," Gwendolyn said. "But we would demand certain guarantees…"

"They would be guaranteed their lives," Colin said. "But what else they are guaranteed depends on how quickly they surrender."

Gwendolyn held his eyes for a long moment, then nodded. "We don't have the authority to speak for *all* of the Thousand Families," she said. Colin nodded. He wasn't entirely sure she had the authority to speak on behalf of *her* family, let alone the others. "But we will take your words back to Earth."

Colin wondered, absently, just how they planned to explain receiving a message from the rebels, as the Thousand Families had vetoed any thought of opening lines of communication. He shrugged a moment later, dismissing the thought. It wasn't his problem.

"Good," he said. "We shall be following; we'll be in the Sol System five weeks from today. I suggest you make it clear to them, very clear, that the harder we have to fight to take control, the less merciful we will be feeling. Do you understand me?"

Gwendolyn bowed her head, submissively. Colin almost pitied her before realising that it was yet another attempt at emotional

manipulation. She was *very* good at it. He hardened his heart, then reached into his jacket pocket and dropped a chip on the table in front of her. She glanced at it, then looked up at him. He read the question in her eyes.

"My proposed peace terms," Colin said. "I haven't bothered to exaggerate to allow you to haggle me down to the barely acceptable. Those are my terms. If you refuse to accept them, the Thousand Families will be destroyed."

"And the Empire might go down with us," Gwendolyn pointed out.

"We'll take that chance," Colin said. He stood. "You'll be returned to your ship in an hour. Once you are there, head back to Earth at once. If we beat you there, it will be very embarrassing for you."

It would be, he knew. Quite apart from the failure to ensure that the Families Council had a chance to debate Colin's terms, it would be strange for a single ship to be beaten by an entire fleet. Colin knew, better than most serving officers, that the more ships there were in a fleet, the slower the average speed. After all, ships could suffer navigational or drive failures, forcing the entire fleet to slow down to ensure they stayed together…

He walked out of the hatch, then headed towards the CIC. Five weeks to Earth, he told himself, five weeks to the final confrontation with the Thousand Families and their loyalists. If the files were accurate, Home Fleet hadn't been in any better state that the Morrison Fleet… and it hadn't had a commander as independent as Admiral Wachter. But he knew, better than anyone, just how inaccurate the files could be. It was possible that the Thousand Families *had* managed to find a competent CO for Home Fleet.

Colin smiled, dismissing the thought. One way or another, he knew, it would all be over soon. And then the *real* challenge — reforming the Empire — would begin.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tiberius stood in his office, staring out over the High City.

It looked so safe and tranquil. And it *was* safe. The aristocrats might contest with one another for power and position, but they would never resort to physical conflict, while the servants were all conditioned into obedience and docility. They would never turn on their masters, no matter what they were offered. It was impossible, even, for a servant to attack an aristocrat at the behest of their master.

But that safety was rapidly becoming illusionary. The news from Morrison had arrived last night and the Thousand Families were quietly digesting it. So far, a full council had not been summoned, which Tiberius had to admit was an ominous sign. Everyone was probably contemplating their fallback positions in the wake of losing Morrison. And Admiral Wachter… the final report had suggested that he'd been killed, but Tiberius had his doubts. Admiral Wachter was unlikely to die so easily.

If he's in rebel hands, Tiberius thought, *he might join them*.

Wachter was loyal, but that loyalty had to have been stretched to breaking point when the Blackshirts had turned on him. The contingency plans had been limited; Wachter had been marked for death if he surrendered, or if there was good reason to think he would mutiny against the Empire. But now… if he'd survived, who could blame him for switching sides?

Apart from the Thousand Families, of course, Tiberius thought.

The news hadn't leaked yet, which was quite remarkable. Somehow, the lid had been kept on, but it wouldn't last. Losing Morrison meant that the rebels were within a month of Earth… no, it meant that the rebels had *been* within a month of Earth. If they'd set out as soon as they'd secured Morrison, they could be within hours of Earth by now. There had been no reports of bases obliterated or core systems seized, but that meant nothing. The rebels had to know that taking Earth would give them control… or collapse the Empire into rubble.

There would be panic, he knew, when the news finally leaked out. And the underground, which had been suspiciously quiet, would act. And then…

We might be on the verge of losing, he thought. *And in doing so, we might lose everything*.

His intercom chimed. "Yes?"

"My Lord, we picked up a message," Sharon said. "Gwendolyn and Pompey have returned to Sol. They are requesting to speak with you as soon as possible."

"Have them sent here, then hold my calls," Tiberius ordered. "Unless the rebels are about to attack, I don't want to know about it."

He scowled as he stared down at the city, feeling an odd spurt of envy for the pleasure-seeking aristocrats. He'd been brought up to consider them worthless, overgrown children who would never been suitable to hold authority within their families, yet they had nothing to worry about. Even those who had been junior members of the Roosevelt Family could still enjoy lives of complete luxury. Their family might have collapsed, but they were still taken care of. But that might be about to change.

It was nearly an hour before Sharon showed Gwendolyn and Pompey into his office. Both of them looked tired; Gwendolyn hadn't even bothered to change into one of her more eye-catching garments. Tiberius smiled in amusement, then waited for Sharon to bring drinks and a small selection of sandwiches. He hadn't been eating properly lately and she'd started to nag him about it.

"All right," he said. "What did they say?"

"They're on their way," Gwendolyn said. "They want us to surrender, now."

Tiberius quirked an eyebrow. "On what terms?"

"They will guarantee our lives," Pompey said, darkly. "But they made no other promises."

Tiberius shook his head. Even with a seemingly-invincible rebel fleet bearing down on them, it was unlikely in the extreme that the Families Council would just roll over for the rebels. They'd want more than just their lives, even if the rebels held all the cards. And they didn't, Tiberius knew. The destruction of the Empire's industrial base would leave the rebels with an impossible task. It would take centuries to rebuild everything the Thousand Families could destroy.

"I spoke to their leader extensively," Gwendolyn said. "He was… *resistant* to my charms."

"A man of good taste," Tiberius teased.

Gwendolyn made a rude gesture, then continued. "The rebels are unlikely to be placated by anything short of a power-sharing arrangement, with them sitting in the cockpit," she said. "I read them pretty thoroughly. Most of them are determined to assert themselves, even if it means prolonging the war. The former mutineers want to secure their position, the planetary rebels want autonomy at the very least and the Beyonders just want to be left alone. I do not believe we can make compromises without giving up most of our power."

Tiberius didn't doubt it. Gwendolyn *was* a good judge of character.

"I didn't see any splits within the rebel leadership we can exploit, either," Gwendolyn added. "They have a general plan of campaign,

one they intend to follow unless we manage to hit them hard enough to force a reconsideration. I think their preferred outcome is one that will please all of the factions, or at least give them enough of their desires that they can claim victory."

"But any of their desires would cost us greatly," Tiberius mused. "Unless we planned to cheat them at a later date."

"I do not believe that they would fall for any trickery," Pompey said. He looked up, his face suddenly very serious. "They are aware of the possibility of treachery. I imagine they will take precautions to prevent us from stabbing a knife in their backs. More to the point, right now they hold the whip hand. Trying to cheat them could be disastrous."

Tiberius hesitated, then nodded. "I don't know what the Families Council would say," he said, darkly. "Did you hear of any other negotiators?"

Gwendolyn and Pompey exchanged glances. "No," Gwendolyn said, finally. "But that doesn't prove anything."

"I know," Tiberius agreed. He looked down at the table. "If they choose to object to sending messengers…"

Pompey snorted, rudely. "Let us be clear on this," he said. "We have lost two out of three Class-III shipyards. We have lost the Morrison Fleet, plus any number of smaller formations that tried to slow the rebels down. Right now, Home Fleet is the last deployable formation under our control. Everything else is either tied down or unable to reach Earth in time to be of service. We are, in short, in a very weak position.

"The rebels, by contrast, are riding high. They've punched out the only real threat to their positions, allowing them to advance on Earth. Their morale is sky-high, their determination to bring us to our knees driving them forwards… and they know that they will not have a better chance to win outright. This is not the time to haggle. I think we should seek terms as soon as the rebels enter this star system."

"I know that," Tiberius snapped. "But I don't speak for everyone."

"Then talk the council into it," Pompey said. "Because if the rebels take the system by force, they won't be inclined to offer us anything. And why the hell should they?"

Tiberius nodded. "But how do we know they will keep their word?"

He stood. "I want to speak with one of the prisoners," he added. He'd contemplated it as soon as the prisoners had arrived on Earth, but he hadn't had the time. "And then I will talk to the council."

* * *

Imperial Intelligence, Jeremy considered, *must be going soft*.

There had been a very brief mind probe, bad enough to give him headaches every time he'd looked into a bright light, and then nothing. The intelligence officers had tried to sweet talk him into doing what they wanted, then even offering large bribes, but they hadn't tried to force him to talk again. It was odd, definitely. Perhaps someone had finally convinced them of the value of honouring promises of good treatment… or perhaps someone had merely decided to leave the prisoners to stew in their own juices.

He looked around the cell, wondering if boredom would eventually drive him to talk. It was a larger cell than he'd expected, but it was bare apart from a bunk and toilet. One wall had been replaced completely by metal bars, allowing the guards to see him at all times. If there was anyone else in the complex, he hadn't been able to see or talk to them. But then, isolation was probably part of the softening up process.

And he had no idea where he was. They'd moved him to a ship for several weeks, then transferred him to a planetary surface, but he'd lost track of time completely. It felt as if the universe had shrunk down to the prison cell. It could have been months or years since he'd been taken captive. Maybe the rebellion was over, maybe Colin was dead… there were days when he had to force himself not to dwell on the possibilities. There were too many days when he seriously considered just trying to end his life.

He looked up as four armoured guards stepped up to the bars and motioned for him to stand up and come forward. They were always masked, completely faceless, but he had seen enough of them to tell that there were seven guards assigned to watching him. It was easy to tell the difference if he studied the way they moved. Most of them were surprisingly disciplined too, compared to the rumours he'd heard. Perhaps Imperial Intelligence handed out random brutality on a carefully calculated schedule.

Or maybe they're still trying to soften me up, he thought, as he reached the bars and thrust his hands through the gap. The guards pushed his hands back; tiredly, he turned around and allowed them to cuff his hands behind his back. They never seemed to relax around him, even though they had to know that he wasn't augmented into superhumanity. Every time they took him out of the cell, he was cuffed and shackled to restrict his movements. And they rarely bothered to speak to him.

They hustled him down a long dark corridor and into a smaller interrogation room. It looked exactly the same as the room on Morrison, complete with chair and save for the absence of an interrogator. The guards sat him down in the chair, chained him down

so thoroughly he could barely move a muscle, then withdrew, leaving him alone. Jeremy glanced around, puzzled. Was his interrogator even present or was this just another mental game?

He looked up as a hidden door in the metal wall cracked open, revealing a young man with short blonde hair and surprisingly handsome features. Jeremy had no difficulty in recognising the signs of extensive genetic engineering and modification, even though they were more elaborate than anything he'd seen away from a high-gravity world. The man carried himself like he was in charge. And yet, Jeremy realised, he hadn't really seen a holding cell before at all.

"Well," Jeremy said, finally. "Who are you?"

The man sat down and faced Jeremy. "Does it matter?"

"It could," Jeremy said.

"I wish to apologise for your treatment," the man said. "There was some… dispute over how best to handle rebel POWs."

Jeremy snorted. "Do you think that apologising will be sufficient?"

"Perhaps not," the man said. "My name is Tiberius. Does that mean anything to you?"

Jeremy took a longer look at his features. He'd never been one of the officers who studied the aristocracy with a pathetic intensity, but he knew the major players. "Tiberius Cicero?"

"Yes," Tiberius said. "I need to speak with you."

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage," Jeremy said. He rattled his chains meaningfully. "And you seem to have a captive audience, if a powerless one. What do you want to say?"

"Your commander has taken Morrison," Tiberius informed him. "And he is on his way to Earth."

Jeremy considered it. Assuming he was speaking to the *real* Cicero, he was on Earth. And if news of Morrison's fall had only just arrived, it was clear that the rebel feel might be hard on its heels. If Colin had taken Morrison, there would be nothing between him and Earth. No wonder the guards were treating him oddly. The prospect of brutal retaliation had to be alarmingly clear.

"I will believe you, for the moment," he said. "What does that have to do with me?"

Tiberius looked surprised. "Why do you doubt me?"

Jeremy laughed at him. "You don't think Imperial Intelligence is full of little tricks?"

"I am me," Tiberius said. "Your commander has offered us our lives, if we surrender."

"Then take it," Jeremy advised. "You won't get a better offer."

Tiberius met his eyes. "How do we know you — he — will keep his word?"

“The same guarantee you offered to my crew and myself,” Jeremy said. “I was promised good treatment, as I recall.”

“Point,” Tiberius said. “But we cannot just surrender.”

“Then gamble on victory,” Jeremy said. He sighed, loudly enough to be irritating. “Why did you even come here if you are reluctant to trust our word?”

“I wanted to know if your commander could be trusted,” Tiberius said.

Jeremy snorted. “Colin is a decent person,” he said. “Perhaps too decent, at times. You and your families would not be treated badly, if you accepted his terms. But I don’t think that you could keep your power and place, not now. You’ve done too much damage to humanity.”

He looked up. “Do you understand,” he added, “just how many people joined us when they realised there might be a chance at victory? Even if the odds were stacked against us, we had superdreadnaughts and determination and new ideas… and people, willing to fight beside us to bring down an edifice that blighted thousands of worlds and billions of lives. Your legacy is one of hatred, sown by your greed and determination to take whatever you wanted from the people who worked hard to earn it. And now they’re coming for you.”

Tiberius’s face tightened. “You may be right,” he conceded. “But we will have to see what happens before we surrender.”

“Be careful you don’t surrender too late,” Jeremy mocked, as Tiberius rose to his feet. “You might have nothing left to use as a bargaining chip.”

Tiberius looked down at him, but said nothing. Instead, he just walked through the hatch and vanished.

After a long moment, the guards returned and escorted Jeremy back to his cell.

He contemplated what he’d been told as soon as he was alone. It was possible it was a trick of some kind, but it seemed pointless. Why would the enemy wish to *claim* to be weak — or losing the war? They’d want to convince him they were winning, surely? And if it was the truth…

The thought cheered him and worried him in equal measure. Prisoners had been killed before on Camelot, just to prevent the rebels from liberating them. What would happen to him and the others? Where *were* the others? He could have kicked himself for not asking Tiberius that question. The young man might have known the answer.

He tossed possibilities over and over in his head long into the night.

* * *

"There was a message inserted into the communications network," Gaunt said. "The rebels have taken Morrison and they're on their way here."

Adeeba smiled, watching as Frandsen trained a group of young men in using modified powered combat armour. Somehow, the underground had obtained it from a military base, only to discover that they didn't have anyone who knew how to use it. They were lucky, Frandsen had pointed out, that they hadn't stolen Marine-issue gear. *That* was keyed to a specific user and jammed up if anyone else tried to use it.

"Good to hear," she said. "How did the message reach the communications network?"

"I'm not sure," Gaunt admitted. She looked rather irritated with her next sentence. "They wouldn't have told me in any case."

She smiled, darkly. "The time may have come to start moving forward with our plans," she added. "Do you have any idea how long it will take them to reach Earth?"

"They could be here by now," Adeeba said. She shook her head. "There are just too many factors that might affect matters. They might well be able to get a message to us before they actually arrive…"

"Maybe," Gaunt said. She looked down at her hands, then up at the young men. Most of them, Adeeba knew, had volunteered despite knowing the risks. They had nothing to look forward to on Earth. "Can we count on you to join us?"

"Of course," Adeeba said. The alternative, she knew, was staying in the apartment or an underground base, hoping and praying that the offensive succeeded. She couldn't endure much more of *that*. "What do you want us to do?"

"We've been trying to work out how best to act, when your fleet arrives," Gaunt said. "The problem, of course, is timing. If we move too fast, we will be destroyed by the security forces before your fleet can intervene; if we move too slowly, we might not be allowed to join any post-war government. So… when the time comes, we will have to act fast. What would your people like us to do?"

"Shut down the defences," Adeeba said, immediately. She doubted it was possible to take them all down, but the more the defences were weakened, the easier it would be for Colin to take the planet. It would also make it easier for the underground to secure targets on the ground. "And perhaps threaten the High City."

"We shall see," Gaunt said. She made the words sound vaguely threatening. "We shall see."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Colin had — foolishly — expected Sol to look different. Humanity's first star should have been special, somehow. But from five light years distance, Sol was no different from any of the hundreds of other stars visible through the observation blister. It was chilling to realise that the stars would still be burning brightly, millions of years after Colin himself was long forgotten. He contemplated the thought for a long moment, then turned and smiled as Jason Cordova and Daria were shown into the compartment. Behind them, Mariko brought up the rear.

"Well done," Colin said. He'd had his doubts about Cordova, but he had to admit that the man had done very well. Very well indeed. "Without Wolf 359, the Empire will start to totter towards collapse."

"Well done to you too," Cordova boomed. "Without Morrison, the Empire will find it hard to mount a counterattack before time runs out."

Colin nodded. The data the rebel spies had collected had identified two remaining fleets within the Core Worlds, one protecting Earth and the other protecting Terra Nova. Colin wasn't sure which one to go after first; Earth offered the prospect of a quick victory, but Terra Nova was vitally important. He wouldn't put it past the Thousand Families to prevent the massive shipyard from falling into rebel hands by destroying it.

And then there was the other problem. Their supply lines, already far too long, were even weaker now that they had almost reached Earth. Taking Terra Nova offered the chance to replenish their supplies without having to wait for new material to be shipped from Morrison — or Jackson's Folly. It was all too easy to imagine the chain snapping, forcing them to abandon the offensive until they obtained new supplies. And every day they gave the Empire only gave the Thousand Families more time to prepare their fallback options…

He sat down and activated the portable display. A holographic image of the Core Worlds appeared in front of him, showing the location of known enemy fleets and fortifications. Quite a few worlds were heavily defended, even though they didn't have superdreadnaughts of their own. The Empire had been willing to allow local defence forces for the worlds that had limited internal autonomy, but they had been reluctant to allow anyone outside the Imperial Navy to build anything heavier than a battlecruiser.

"The problem," he said, "is that Terra Nova and Earth are close enough to allow mutual support. If we attack one, the other will send ships to assist our target. We therefore need to prevent them from

doing that — and if we can get them to denude our target of its defences, it would be a definite bonus."

"You won't get them to denude Earth of her defences," Cordova said. "I imagine they had an awful catfight over sending even one starship from Earth to Terra Nova, particularly after we took out Wolf 359."

"Probably," Colin agreed. He pointed a finger at Earth. "I want you to take your fleet, five of the arsenal ships and a handful of ECM-equipped destroyers and charge through the Sol System. Make yourself very noticeable, convince them that the entire fleet is raiding their territory. Don't let them think about a threat to anywhere else."

Cordova smiled. "And you will be taking the rest of the fleet to Terra Nova?"

"Yep," Colin said. "We'll give you ten minutes. If we're lucky, the Thousand Families will recall the naval units protecting Terra Nova, leaving it ripe for the plucking. But if we're not…"

He shook his head. "We should have the firepower to convince them to back down and surrender," he added. "If they don't, we can take out the shipyard with ballistic missiles."

"That could be an expensive waste of effort," Cordova pointed out. "They might notice the missiles."

"We can destroy the facilities and then pull out, leaving the fortifications to wither on the vine," Colin countered. "Your girlfriend will be upset, but we will have to live with it."

Cordova stroked his beard. "She's already going to kill me for Wolf 359," he said. "Are you intent on getting us both killed?"

Colin had to laugh. "We launch the operation one hour from now," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Cordova boomed. "They will regret the day they ever heard of us."

"I think they already do," Daria said, tartly.

Colin smiled, then waited for them to leave the compartment and leave him alone. It was strange not having to plan an operation down to the tiniest detail, strange and wonderful at the same time. The Imperial Navy's smarter officers knew better than to assume their subordinates could be trusted to carry out their orders, so they planned everything and punished each and every deviation from the plan. Colin, on the other hand, knew and trusted his subordinates. Besides, he knew from long experience that the time it took to send a signal back to the command ship and receive new instructions could be lethal.

And the Imperial Navy could never have launched an operation at one hour's notice.

He allowed his smile to widen. The Empire would never be the

same again.

* * *

"The post-battle analysis indicates that the point defence network at Morrison was badly compromised," the analyst droned. "This created a cascading failure that knocked out individual nodes of the network, which resulted in the entire network eventually losing the capability to regenerate itself without shutting the whole system down and restarting it. The rebels took advantage of the collapse to disable or destroy the Morrison Fleet."

Tiberius sighed inwardly as the analyst droned on. It was rare for someone so junior to be summoned to face the Families Council, which suggested that Grand Admiral Porter and Admiral Foster feared for their jobs. Not that he blamed them for *that*, he had to admit. The Families Council had been in an evil mood ever since news of Morrison had leaked out several hours ago. There was already panic in the streets and dire threats from various family gatherings.

"Fine," he said, hitting the table hard enough to make them all jump. The analyst stared at him and started to splutter. "Let us ignore the precise technical details. Can Home Fleet be protected against a similar attack?"

"We can reprogram the network to work around a successful jamming effort," the analyst assured him. "However, they will still be able to jam individual sections for brief periods of time. We would need to redesign the system completely to prevent the jamming from affecting it at all."

"Good, see to it," Tiberius said. He looked over at the other Family Heads, who seemed shocked at his sudden interruption. "The precise details don't matter. What *does* matter is that we are on the verge of losing the war."

He smiled at their shock, then pressed on. "The rebels are coming to Earth," he added. "They may already be on their way. We need to consider ways to preserve what we can."

Lord Rothschild leaned forward. "I admit that the war situation has taken a turn not necessarily to our advantage," he said. "But the rebels seem to want *everything*. How can we surrender on such terms?"

"Then we try to offer them different terms," Tiberius said. "We still have something to bargain with…"

The alarms sounded. "Or perhaps we might just have run out of time," he said, instead. "The rebels are here."

* * *

Commander Patrick Jones had never visited Earth before the mutinies, but he had to admit that he was impressed by the sheer volume of activity within the system. Earth, Venus, Mars and Jupiter were surrounded by a formidable network of orbital fortifications, industrial production nodes and asteroid settlements, while thousands of interstellar and interplanetary ships plied their trade between the asteroid belt and the planets. There was no shortage of targets for hit-and-run raids, even though there had been no piracy in the system for hundreds of years. But then, the Imperial Navy had long since driven pirates out of the system. It had been considered safe.

"Take us towards Earth," Cordova ordered. "Then, once they have a solid lock, take us back again. Let them get a good look at us."

Patrick shook his head in astonishment. Cordova was deliberately *baiting* Home Fleet, a formation with seven squadrons of superdreadnaughts under its flag. On impulse, he brought up the live feed from the drones Cordova had launched towards Home Fleet and examined their reports. Home Fleet seemed to be powering up, but very slowly. If they hadn't been positioned within Luna's gravity shadow, he would have seriously considered proposing a raid like the one they had launched against Wolf 359.

"Taking their time," Cordova agreed. "But I doubt they will chase us."

He looked over at the communications officer. "Transmit the recorded message," he ordered, shortly. "I want the entire system to hear our manifesto."

* * *

"Four squadrons of superdreadnaughts and thirty-seven smaller craft," Admiral Porter reported. "Admiral Foster has taken direct command of Home Fleet. He's powering up now."

Too slow, Tiberius said. He studied the reports from the massive sensor networks orbiting Earth. The rebels seemed to be taunting the defenders, rather than going in and taking them out… there was a crude overconfidence about their actions that bothered him. Did they really believe that the Imperial Navy would leave them alone?

"Order Home Fleet to go after the bastards," Lord Bernadotte ordered, tartly. "I want the rebels thrown out of our system."

Admiral Porter hesitated, listening to someone else through his earpiece. "We cannot hope to intercept them," he said, finally. "They've already had time to recharge their flicker drives, so they can and will just jump out as soon as they see us coming. We cannot get at them until they choose to come into missile range."

"We can't leave them there," Lord Rothschild insisted. "They're mocking us!"

"And proving that Sol isn't secure," Lord Edison added.

Tiberius rolled his eyes. Trust them to think about the political aspects of the situation *first*. But they were right, he had to admit. Right now, there were countless underground groups watching as the rebels casually violated the Sol System without punishment. Home Fleet might be the most powerful formation left in the Empire, but it was useless if it wasn't intimidating to the Empire's enemies. Besides, they didn't dare bombard Earth into submission. Too much of their workforce and their families lived on the homeworld.

"Admiral Foster intends to dispatch several battlecruiser squadrons to intercept the rebels," Admiral Porter said. "He also proposes the recall of the squadrons from Terra Nova."

"But that will leave Terra Nova uncovered," Lord Bernadotte snapped. "We cannot risk our last Class-III shipyard!"

"But Earth itself is under threat," Lord Rothschild countered. "If we lose Earth, we lose everything!"

"The rebels aren't even trying to break down the defences," Lord Bernadotte insisted. "For all we know, this is a feint. They *want* us to pull ships from Terra Nova."

Tiberius winced at the panic swelling through the chamber. They were the rulers of the known universe, lords of thousands of worlds… and they were panicking. And perhaps they were right to panic. Earth had been their citadel, their invulnerable fortress, for so long that they had grown used to thinking of the planet as untouchable. But the rebels, perhaps, thought differently… and they had knocked down dozens of certainties as they made their way towards Earth. Why should Earth's invulnerability be any different?

He looked over at Admiral Porter's image. "Admiral," he said, "what do *you* think?"

Admiral Porter hesitated, glancing from face to face. Tiberius sighed inwardly as he realised it was useless. Admiral Porter wasn't a fighter; hell, he'd never even set foot on a starship's bridge. The advice he would give would be guided by political considerations, not sound military thinking. If Admiral Wachter had been in command, instead, he would have done what the situation demanded, not what the Families Council wanted. But Admiral Wachter was lost to them…

He gritted his teeth as the Admiral hemmed and hawed. Who would have thought that someone could give a long speech that basically boiled down to asking what was politically acceptable? But then, the Families Council had only themselves to blame. If they had chosen competent men instead of sycophants… he pushed the thought aside, bitterly. There was nothing they could do about it *now*. And,

even if they won the war, it was unlikely they could change.

"We take a vote," Lord Rothschild said. "All those in favour of recalling the Terra Nova squadrons?"

Tiberius hesitated, then voted against. But only three others joined him.

"Admiral, recall the squadrons," Lord Edison ordered.

Admiral Porter nodded and obeyed.

* * *

"They're sending battlecruisers up after us," Patrick said, as new icons separated themselves from the looming mass of Home Fleet. "But the superdreadnaughts are remaining where they are."

"Good choice, for them," Cordova commented. He looked over at the helmsman. "Pull us back, gently. We don't want them to get discouraged."

Patrick blinked in surprise. "You plan to let them chase us for a while?"

"Nothing like a pointless chase to annoy someone," Cordova said. He smirked, stroking his beard. "Besides, it will make them feel like they're doing something."

Patrick had to agree. The battlecruisers were faster than superdreadnaughts, but as long as Cordova was careful they would never be able to come into missile range… and, if they did, Cordova could simply jump out. On the other hand…

"If we outrun them, they'll know we don't have any real superdreadnaughts," he pointed out, slowly. "Unless they think we've somehow boosted the normal space drives."

"They won't know for sure," Cordova agreed. His smirk managed to grow wider, somehow. "And if you were on a battlecruiser, would you really want to *catch* a force of enemy superdreadnaughts?"

He shook his head. "No, they'll make it look good," he said. "But they won't try to catch up with us so hard they actually succeed."

* * *

Tiberius watched as the enemy starships played cat and mouse with the Imperial Navy battlecruisers, wondering just what they were thinking. He knew very little about military strategy, but it seemed odd that several squadrons of superdreadnaughts would try hard to avoid a squadron of much smaller battlecruisers. On the other hand, they might not want to waste missiles on the battlecruisers, he told

himself. They weren't likely to find any replacements for expended missiles in Sol.

"So," Lord Rothschild demanded. "When will the squadrons from Terra Nova arrive here?"

"Two minutes, assuming they start out at once," Admiral Porter said. He seemed more confident, now that disaster had failed to materialise. "But it depends on how deeply they were within the gravity shadow of the gas giant."

Tiberius nodded. The Terra Nova Shipyards, like the Jupiter Shipyards, were buried deep within a gas giant's gravity shadow. It gave them some protection from a hit and run raid, but it also ensured that the defenders had climb out of the gravity shadow themselves if they wanted to flicker to Earth. And he had to admit, despite himself, that he was worried. The rebels might well want to take out Terra Nova, even if they didn't go after Earth. After all, most of Earth's defences were fixed in place…

New green icons appeared on the display. "They have arrived," Admiral Porter said. "I have ordered them to steer towards the rebels."

* * *

"New contacts," the sensor officer snapped. "Three squadrons of superdreadnaughts, one definitely identified as being from Terra Nova."

"I'd hate to think that they might have come from somewhere else," Cordova said. He grinned at the officer, then smiled at the display. "They didn't quite get the timing right."

Patrick had to agree. If the imps had been luckier, they might have jumped right into missile range, repeating the trick Cordova had pulled at Wolf 359. But instead, they were just outside missile range… and closing fast. All things considered, he decided, both sides had been luckier than they deserved.

"Colin will be pleased," Cordova said. Evidently, he agreed with Patrick's silent assessment of the situation. "And the enemy will be caught between two fires."

Patrick nodded. The enemy faced the prospect of losing one of the two targets they absolutely *had* to protect. And if they allowed their ships to be caught out of position…

"Lock missiles on the enemy superdreadnaughts, then fire as soon as they come into range," Cordova ordered. "Then jump us out. We can't stand up to a battering match, not now."

The seconds ticked down to zero as the enemy superdreadnaughts

closed in. As soon as they entered missile range, the arsenal ships opened fire, spitting a hail of missiles towards their targets. They'd know they weren't chasing superdreadnaughts now, Patrick knew; the arsenal ships were quite distinctive. But it no longer mattered. If the rebels were lucky, the imps hadn't managed to recharge their drives yet….

"Get us out of here," Cordova ordered. There was no time to wait around and see what happened. "Now!"

Space twisted around them and they were gone.

* * *

Tiberius watched, grimly, as the enemy ships flickered out, leaving a wall of missiles roaring towards the superdreadnaughts. Their point defence started to fire at once, sweeping dozens of missiles out of existence, but enough survived to crash headlong into the wall of battle. Three superdreadnaughts were destroyed outright, two more left streaming atmosphere as they staggered out of line. And the rebels, he saw, had jumped clean away. They hadn't taken a single casualty.

"Damn it," Lord Bernadotte said. His voice was coldly furious. One of the damaged superdreadnaughts belonged to his family, rather than the Imperial Navy. "I told you we shouldn't have recalled the ships…"

"A courier boat just jumped into the system," Admiral Porter snapped. "Terra Nova is under attack!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hammer was an unusual arsenal ship. Unlike her peers, she had been designed to launch missiles one by one, without triggering their drives. Hidden behind a sensor mask, she could unload her missiles into space without being detected, even alarmingly close to the Terra Nova shipyards. No one had a clue that she was there.

Captain Kosovo felt his implants itching as he accessed the live feed from the ship's passive sensors, downloading it directly into his head. Being so close to Earth bothered him, even though cold logic insisted that they were completely undetectable. The Geeks had not existed so long as a collective without knowing when best to take precautions and going so close to the Enemies of Science was not something they cared to do. But there was little choice. One by one, the missiles were pushed out and down towards their target.

"All missiles deployed," the weapons officer said, finally. He didn't bother to look at his commander as he spoke. Their minds were already touching in the computer network. "Forty minutes to likely detection range."

Kosovo allowed himself a tight smile. The fortresses protecting the Terra Nova Shipyard — which didn't actually orbit Terra Nova itself, yet another hint of the Empire's regretful imprecision — were buried deep in the gas giant's gravity shadow. Under normal circumstances, they would have plenty of warning before an enemy attack fleet could get into range. Even now, with Morrison gone and Earth itself about to come under attack, the fortifications were not at full alert. But then, he considered, the imps had no idea how to maintain their systems. Every time they went to battlestations, they took years off their technology's lifespan.

Pathetic, he thought.

It didn't help that the missiles were another Geek invention. They looked like standard Imperial Navy-issue missiles, but the Geeks had coated them in stealthy materials that would absorb radar and sensor pulses directed at them. There was no way they could remain hidden once their drives went active, of course, yet as long as they remained on their ballistic trajectories they would be effectively impossible to detect. They could drift right through the massive sensor network protecting the shipyard as if they weren't there.

"Steer us out of the gravity shadow," he ordered. "And then hold us at the planned observation point."

The Geeks had two interests in joining the war. One was in securing the right to experiment as they pleased, without their technology being considered disruptive and threatening to the natural

order. The other was in actually *testing* their more interesting theories and concepts. Kosovo knew himself to be far from the Geek ideal, yet even he was fascinated by the thought of actually seeing some of the new technology in war. Who knew if theory would live up to practice?

He glanced around his bridge. An Imperial Navy inspection team would have had a fit if they'd seen it, for it didn't look clean or tidy at all. The consoles were open, exposing their innards; wiring lay everywhere and all four bridge crewmen were connected to the processors though implants inserted into their skulls. It was a mess. And yet, it was faster and more efficient than anything the Imperial Navy possessed. The Geeks looked forward to the day when everyone could merge with computers and expand their minds. They were sure that it would be a step closer to redesigning the human race as a whole.

"And send a laser signal," he added. "The missiles are on their way."

* * *

The gas giant didn't look anything like as spectacular as Jupiter, Colin considered, as the rebel fleet crept closer to the gravity shadow. It was a massive blue-green ball of light, hanging in the darkness of space; there were no rings or clouds of space dust orbiting it for the tourists to admire. The gas giant's only companion was a moon half the size of Earth, a moon that had been terraformed long ago. Now, it served as the barracks for the millions of shipyard workers and their families.

He had to admit that the shipyard itself looked impressive, though. There were hundreds of construction slips, industrial nodes and asteroid resource bases, surrounded by dozens of orbital fortresses and a small formation of enemy ships. Someone in the Bernadotte Family had to have paid out a large fortune in bribes, he decided, or perhaps there was some elaborate *quid pro quo* involved. The Household Troops were not supposed to have access to so many superdreadnaughts, no matter how important their possessions were.

"Admiral," the sensor officer reported. "The enemy superdreadnaughts are powering up and inching out of the gravity shadow."

Right on time, Colin noted. He glanced at the countdown and smiled to himself. Cordova would be demonstrating in the Sol System, showing himself and a fleet of illusionary superdreadnaughts to the enemy. He'd planned on the assumption that the enemy fleet wouldn't withdraw, but it was nice to see the plan working. It would be a great

deal easier to secure the shipyard without the superdreadnaughts.

"Keep us well away from their flight path," he ordered. "We don't want to be detected now."

The cloaking devices had two major flaws, both of which had been hammered into his head at the academy. They couldn't hide *everything*, thus a starship too close to a cloaked ship might well be able to detect it. And it was impossible to raise shields or fire weapons without breaking the cloak. If the enemy superdreadnaughts picked up a sniff of their presence, the rebel fleet would be hammered before it had a chance to respond. But as the superdreadnaughts advanced out of the gravity shadow, they missed the rebels completely. One by one, they flickered out towards Earth.

"They're gone, sir," the sensor officer reported.

Colin smiled. The timing had been perfect. "Order the missiles to engage as soon as they enter terminal attack range," he ordered. "And then prepare to sound battlestations."

* * *

Commodore Wilma Bernadotte watched the superdreadnaughts vanish, silently cursing the Families Council under her breath. The agreements that allowed the Bernadotte Family to operate superdreadnaughts of its own had never stipulated that they would be under Imperial Navy command, but the conditions attached to deploying an additional squadron of superdreadnaughts to Terra Nova had changed that — and not for the better. Now the Families Council was panicking and Terra Nova was being stripped of its defences, right after the loss of Wolf 359.

Wilma would have liked to gloat about the Sandakan Family's misfortune. After all, losing Wolf 359 would hurt the Empire — but it would ensure more demands for products from Terra Nova. The economic slowdown that had seen half the slips left empty and industrial nodes idle would come to an end, she knew, once people realised they could start ordering their products from Terra Nova instead. And the Bernadotte Family would be well-placed to start taking advantage of its sudden prominence. There was no way the other two shipyards could be replaced in less than a decade, assuming the money could be found to rebuild them. Until then, Bernadotte would reign supreme.

She ran a hand through her purple hair as she surveyed the tactical display. The Bernadotte Family owned the gas giant and its companion moon completely, forbidding all others from entering the colossal gravity shadow. It ensured that anything that showed itself

was considered a smuggler, a pirate or a rebel spy. Wilma had standing orders to engage anything that didn't carry a secure IFF beacon, issued by the family. Even the Imperial Navy wasn't allowed to enter the gravity shadow without her permission.

But she couldn't help feeling worried. The shipyard was dangerously exposed — and almost certainly on the list of rebel targets. She'd seen what had happened at Morrison… and even though she'd ordered her crews to take precautions she couldn't help worrying about losing her own point defence. The colossal investment she'd made in orbital weapons platforms and automated systems would be wasted if *her* point defence network went down. In fact…

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted by alarms howling through her command station. Red icons flared to life on the display, impossibly close to the defences. For a long moment, Wilma's mind refused to accept what she was seeing. The passive sensor network would have picked up any starships, cloaked or not, that had come so close to the defences. There was no way those missiles could be real…

She understood, even as her crews scrambled to reach their duty stations. The rebels — and it had to be the rebels — had launched their missiles on ballistic trajectories. They'd solved the problem of burning out the missile drives by simply not activating them at all, right up until the moment detection was inevitable. And then the drives had gone active.

Her point defence was still frantically powering up, she realised. It was too late.

* * *

Colin felt his smile grow wider as the fleet dropped its cloak and went to full military power, heading down into the gravity shadow. The sneak attack hadn't worked perfectly, but it had worked well enough to let the missiles get close to their targets. Normally, the enemy's confidence in their defences would be fully justified. Now… the Geeks had upset their calculations once again.

Not that stealth missiles are beyond the Empire's powers, he thought. *They just never put the concept into practical use*.

"One minute to impact," the tactical officer reported.

"Transmit our message after the first impact," Colin ordered. "And then prepare to engage the enemy."

* * *

Wilma watched helplessly as the first laser head detonated, sending a ravening pencil of energy lashing out and burning against her station's shields. Others followed, punching through the shields and digging into her hull. The station groaned like a living thing as the hull was broken in a dozen places, then shuddered violently as contact nukes slammed in and detonated against the hull. Red lights flared up on the status display until the entire board seemed to be coated in red light, seconds before all power failed.

And then the world seemed to explode into light around her.

* * *

"Five of the fortresses are gone, sir," the tactical officer reported. "Three more are badly damaged; the remainder are largely untouched."

"Transmit the message," Colin ordered. There was nothing the defenders could do, now, to prevent him from ripping the shipyard to shreds. But there was a chance to make them surrender. "And then take us into bombardment range."

* * *

Lieutenant Kitty Fergusson had never expected to find herself in command of one station, let alone the entire defensive network. But her CO was enjoying himself on the moon, having anticipated a week or two without any real trouble, and her other superiors were either dead or out of touch. She eyed the expanding cloud of debris that had been Defence Station Alpha and shivered, barely able to keep her shock under control. A station that had been supposed to be damn near indestructible had been blown into fragments, with ease.

The whole situation seemed like a nightmare. She pinched herself, only to discover that it was real. The enemy fleet was neatly out of range of the intact fortifications, but it was perfectly placed to shatter the shipyard itself. Given a few minutes, trillions of credits worth of investment would be utterly destroyed. The rebels had pulled off a daring attack and won.

"Lieutenant," the communications officer said, "we are picking up a rebel message."

Kitty almost cringed. She knew she'd only been promoted because her relatives happened to include a number of loyal Bernadotte clients. And, she suspected, because her CO rather liked looking at her, even though he'd never tried to lure Kitty into bed. She couldn't

think of any tactic that might drive the rebels off, certainly not without devastating the shipyard in the process. And if she destroyed it herself, her family would be expelled from the patronage network and left to grovel for scraps in the gutters. She knew what happened to those who failed so disastrously.

And, even if she did want to fight, would the others follow her?

"Let me hear it," she said.

"The battle is over," the rebel leader said. "Your position is hopeless. You can choose between joining us, accepting internment or being slaughtered. If the former, you will be welcome; we will reward those who join us with promotion and responsibilities they could not have dreamed of under the Thousand Families. If you choose, instead, to be interned, you will be treated well. But if you choose to fight, you will be rapidly destroyed. You have five minutes to make up your mind."

Kitty felt stares boring into the back of her head. She'd never really had to face tough decisions in her life, let alone one that might draw disagreement from her subordinates. The thought of them turning on her had been unthinkable only mere hours ago. Now, she had to consider their reaction. Would they follow her if she sought to fight? Or would they simply stick a knife in her back and surrender themselves?

But, in the end, she knew the fight was hopeless.

"Signal the rebels," she ordered, quietly. "Tell them that we surrender."

* * *

"They've surrendered, sir," the communications officer said.

Colin let out a sigh of relief. Destroying the shipyard would have been easy, but they *needed* the shipyard to start rebuilding the damage caused by the war. But it was also possible that Home Fleet could sortie and recover the shipyard before the war could be brought to an end.

"Order the freighters to move in," he ordered. "I want them everyone on the shipyard loaded onto the freighters as quickly as possible."

He allowed himself a smile. The shipyard was useless without the trained personnel to run it — and the Empire didn't have a large pool of trained manpower. Much of the people they *did* have had died at Jupiter or Wolf 359; even if they stripped smaller shipyards of their personnel it would still take weeks or months to restart operations. In the long run, Colin calculated, the Empire would be unable to put the

shipyard back to work until the matter was settled, one way or the other.

"Send the Geeks a note of congratulations," he added, "then take us back to the edge of the gravity shadow. It's time to head onwards to Earth."

The display showed Earth clearly, only one jump from Terra Nova. By now, Colin suspected, the Thousand Families would be utterly overwhelmed. They probably knew that Terra Nova had been attacked, if his calculations were correct. Unused to making quick decisions, they would have to decide between sending superdreadnaughts rushing back to Terra Nova — and they'd already missed the best opportunity for a genuine victory — or keeping them in position to defend Earth. Politically, he suspected, it would be impossible to decide before it was no longer an issue.

"Send a courier boat to the RV point," he ordered. "I want a full download from Captain Cordova."

He watched the courier boat flicker out, then he turned back to monitoring progress within the gravity shadow. Thankfully, there was no resistance. The shipyards and orbital fortifications were rapidly emptied of their personnel, allowing the freighters to start climbing back up towards the edge of the gravity shadow. Once they jumped out, the personnel would be held at the RV point until the war was over. Or, if it took too long to win, they would be shipped back to Morrison or Jackson's Folly and put to work there.

"There's too many people on the moon to evacuate," the coordinator warned. "Sir…"

"Leave them," Colin ordered, after a moment. The civilians wouldn't be harmed by the Empire, of that he was sure. It would shatter the bonds holding the patronage networks together beyond repair. "Just make sure you confiscate all of the shuttles and anything else they could use to reach orbit."

He watched as the remaining freighters flickered out, then glanced down at the report from the courier boat. Cordova had done well, according to the cloaked ship that had monitored Sol after Cordova had flickered out. The enemy had taken a bloody nose, then had been forced to watch helplessly as the rebels retreated, untouched and untouchable. They had to be fuming with rage…

Not that it matters now, he thought. *We're about to win or lose the war.*

He keyed his console. "All hands, this is the Admiral," he said. "We are about to flicker to Earth, the homeworld of humanity — and the heart of the Empire. The battle we will fight will determine the fate of humanity for a thousand years. If we win, we can reform the Empire and end the colossal abuses of power that have destroyed

trillions of lives. And even if we lose, we will ensure that the Empire's colossal self-confidence will no longer survive. They will change or die.

"Think of your friends, your families, all of those who have suffered at the hands of the Empire," he continued. "This is our best chance to end their suffering, once and for all, and build a new order. This day, win or lose, will be remembered. Let us give them something to recall.

"I expect each and every one of you to do your duty, one final time."

He took a breath. Earth, the homeworld of humanity… he'd never really expected to enter the Sol System with a battle fleet, not until he'd started to plan the first mutiny. Even then, he'd known the odds were against him. But the Empire was a rotting corpse, already dead; he knew he had the opportunity to win.

And even if they didn't win, they would be *remembered*. Others, one day in the future, would use the memory to encourage them to go for their enemy's throats…

"Jump," he ordered.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The argument had started the moment the courier boat had arrived from Terra Nova, reporting that the shipyard was under attack. Tiberius listened helplessly as most of the Family Heads shouted at each other, bickering even as time ran out. He *knew*, with a certainty that surprised him, that the rebels were on their way to Earth. Once they captured Terra Nova, they wouldn't want to give the Empire any time to recover from the shock.

"Gentlemen," Admiral Porter said. They ignored him. "Gentlemen, please…"

Tiberius followed his gaze. New red icons had flared into existence, alarmingly close to Earth. The rebel fleet had arrived. One by one, the Family Heads turned to stare, their argument dying out as they realised that retribution was finally on its way. Tiberius looked from face to face and wondered, absently, just how they had managed to keep power for so long. But as long as they'd controlled the biggest stick in the galaxy, they hadn't *needed* to be subtle. Now, that stick had broken in their hand.

"They're outnumbered," Lord Bernadotte said, in the tones of a man desperately clutching at straws. "We can beat them."

"I doubt it," Tiberius said. Admiral Foster was no Admiral Wachter — and Home Fleet had been in a worse state than the Morrison Fleet, before Wachter had taken command. The rebels, by contrast, were battle-hardened and ready to fight. "We have to consider other options."

"You mean surrender," Lord Rothschild said. "Why would they accept our surrender?"

Tiberius forced his voice to remain calm. "We still control large parts of the economy," he pointed out, smoothly. "If they refuse to accept our surrender on terms" — he knew what terms the rebels would demand, thanks to Gwendolyn — "we can cripple the economy and ensure that they inherit a wasteland. Not to mention force them to shoot their way past Home Fleet, if they refuse to deal with us."

"They'd just agree, then go back on the deal," Lord Bernadotte snapped. "Why should they honour any agreement with us?"

You would do that, Tiberius thought. *If you thought you held the whip hand, you'd break whatever deals you made whenever it suited you.*

"The rebels are trying to form a new government," he said, instead. "If they break their word so blatantly, they will find it impossible to get anyone else to trust them."

"None of the rebel factions will object to us being brutally slaughtered," Lord Bernadotte pointed out, sharply. "Why would they

care?"

"Because it sets a damn precedent," Tiberius snapped back. "They may gloat at our misfortune, but what stops the rebels from doing it again and again?"

Lady Madeline's image flickered out. Tiberius barely noticed.

Alarms sounded a moment later. Tiberius suddenly found his attention torn between the meeting and Sharon, who had burst into the conference room. She *never* did that; hell, it was the one room in the complex that was barred to her, unless it was an absolute emergency.

"My Lord," she said, "the rebels are attacking the High City!"

Tiberius swore, then turned his attention to the other holograms. "We seem to be under attack," he said. A glance at the live feed revealed that the High City wasn't the only place under attack. The underground had been building up its forces and putting them in place. "I think our time has run out."

There was a brief, silent consultation between the other Family Heads. "We take a vote," Lord Rothschild said. "And then we abide by it."

Tiberius waited, nervously, for the results. In the end, all of the remaining Heads decided to offer to surrender, on terms.

"You will speak to the rebels," Lord Rothschild said. "Everyone else will withdraw to the security bunkers."

* * *

"Not bad, for lads with only a few weeks of training," Frandsen said. "They certainly never expected us."

Adeeba nodded. There was one place in the universe where the Empire had to tread carefully — and that was Earth. And there was one place on Earth — the High City — where smashing an insurrection from orbit was completely out of the question. It still astonished her that the underground had managed to move a small regiment of men up to the walls, let alone deploy them without being detected. But they had done a remarkable job.

She glanced down at the terminal, shaking her head in awe. The underground leadership had admitted, finally, that they had a backdoor access route into the planetary defence network. If the imps wanted to shut them out, they would have to shut down the entire system, rendering themselves blind and mute. Instead, they would have to watch helplessly as the rebels took advantage of their system to coordinate their attacks. And the High City wasn't the only place under attack.

"Let's hope the bastards see sense," she muttered. "Or that Colin gets here quickly."

She winced at the thought. There were Household Troops in the High City itself, while there were regiments of loyalist Marines and Blackshirts in orbit. If Colin couldn't get to them in time, the underground would do a great deal of damage, but would eventually — inevitably –be wiped out. But the aristocracy would have had a scare…

Sure, she thought. *And they will make the population of Earth pay for it.*

* * *

Colin couldn't help being impressed by the sheer scale of activity in the Sol System, even though he knew that much of it belonged to the Thousand Families. Sol was still the most densely populated star system in the Empire; Earth, Mars and Venus all had populations that numbered in the billions. But most of the population was completely helpless to alter the course of the Empire.

"Home Fleet is deploying to meet us," the tactical officer reported. "They're not waiting in orbit."

"Understandable," Colin said. "The last thing they want is a missile to accidentally strike Earth."

He studied Home Fleet as it advanced, pushing up and outwards to escape the gravity shadow. Their movements suggested that there had been some improvements, but despite their superiority in numbers Colin was confident of victory. The ships showed plenty of signs of ill-treatment, just like Morrison… and their CO had clearly not been as good a slave driver as Admiral Wachter. In fact, he'd opened the fleet up to a disastrous strike… if Colin had flickered in a little closer, he might have been able to obliterate the fleet in his first missile salvo.

Now, Colin silently asked the enemy CO, *did you take a calculated risk or did you merely get lucky*.

"Launch drones," he ordered. "Is there anything from the surface?"

"Nothing," the communications officer said. "Wait… picking up a message using our codes. The underground needs help."

Colin nodded. "Increase speed," he ordered. There was no time to be subtle. "Take us right down their throats."

He pushed himself back into his chair. One way or the other, he told himself, it would all be over soon.

* * *

Tiberius linked into the planetary communications network, then requested a channel to the rebel ships. It took longer than usual to open the link, reminding him that the rebels didn't answer to the Thousand Families any longer. Normally, if he wanted to talk to anyone at any time, they would be present within minutes. But the rebels could make him wait just for the sheer hell of it.

"This is Admiral Walker," a voice said, finally. The voiceprint matched, according to the analysis, although he knew it was easy to fool them. "What can I do for you?"

"We would like to discuss a truce," Tiberius said, carefully. Had they waited too long? The rebels were threatening both Home Fleet and the High City itself, as well as hundreds of positions in orbit and on the ground. "It is time to end this war."

There was a long pause. "Shut down Home Fleet and the orbital defences, *completely*," Admiral Walker ordered. "Then tell your forces on the ground to pull back, leaving the underground alone. And then we can talk."

Tiberius considered it for a long moment. If Home Fleet shut down, the rebels would have an easy set of targets if they intended treachery. But Tiberius had no illusions about how the battle would go. And, once the rebels won, there would be less incentive for them to seek peace on any terms.

"Very well," he said. "I will issue the orders."

"And then you can board my starship," Admiral Walker added. "We will discuss the peace terms in person."

"Understood," Tiberius said.

The rebels held their positions as he boarded his private shuttle and launched himself into space. He'd travelled in space before, yet he'd never felt so exposed as the shuttle swept away from the planetary defence network and headed towards the rebel fleet. The blunt-nosed superdreadnaughts looked terrifying on the display, their weapons tracking him and his craft with effortless ease. If they had lured him out merely to execute him…

He pushed the thought aside, desperately. He had to assume the rebels were sincere. Because, if they weren't, the Thousand Families were doomed.

* * *

Colin could see the resemblance between Tiberius and Pompey Cicero as the young man — he seemed surprisingly young to be a

Family Head — stepped out of the shuttle. Colin watched through the display as the Marines met him, searched him with brisk efficiency and marched him through a series of airlocks and into a small conference room. Shaking his head, Colin left the display and walked through the airlock himself.

"Welcome," he said, dryly. "I assume your messengers gave you our terms?"

Tiberius nodded. He had less practice than Colin at concealing his feelings, Colin noted, probably because he was still very young. On the other hand, his youth had led him to consider matters that the other Family Heads had found impossible to imagine. Colin hadn't been surprised to learn that it had been Tiberius who had proposed Admiral Wachter as Morrison CO. And it had definitely worked out for him.

"We still have cards to play," Tiberius said. "Let me be blunt, if you don't mind."

Colin smiled, then nodded.

"We control most of the Empire's economic base," Tiberius said. "If you destroy us, we'll destroy the economy for good. It will take you years to rebuild, years you might not have."

"True enough," Colin conceded. "On the other hand, you must understand that you will not be allowed to retain power."

"We will surrender our political power," Tiberius said. "In exchange, we will maintain control over our industries. We will… *adapt* to a universe of competition, where we no longer divide the pie up between us and exclude everyone else. In time, those of us who deserve to survive will survive."

Colin lifted an eyebrow. "Are you confident of survival?"

"We have no other choice," Tiberius said, simply.

He was right, Colin knew, but there was a great deal he wasn't saying. Even with the legal barriers to competition removed, the Thousand Families would still be in a strong position; they'd already own much of the industry their competitors would have to duplicate. Did they believe that Colin wouldn't *notice*? Or did they think that situation would endure indefinitely? There were already plans to expand the industrial base that belonged to the Roosevelt Family in Sector 117. Given time, there *would* be competition on equal terms.

It was tempting, he knew. Tiberius was right; the Thousand Families could shatter the Empire, even if in doing so they ensured their own destruction. But equal competition would either force them to reform or destroy them, soon enough. And yet…

There would be rebels who would see it as a betrayal. How could they *not*? Their planets had been ravaged, their lives had been ruined, just to feed a monster that had eventually run out of people to eat.

They wanted revenge, they wanted the Thousand Families to suffer and burn… they wouldn't like the thought of letting the guilty go free.

But if they did try to destroy the Thousand Families, the remainder of the Empire's economy would collapse. Billions would starve, entire planetary economies would collapse in quick succession, law and order would vanish into nothingness, riots would rapidly turn into mass slaughters, ethnic conflict would be reborn… a new interstellar dark age would be on the cards. It could not be allowed.

Colin took a long breath. He understood warfare, understood how to fight in space. But the Thousand Families understood political and economic warfare far better than any of the rebels. What if there was a sting in the tail? What if they'd already sown the seeds for their recovery? Colin would guard against it, as best as possible, but he knew he might miss something. What if he failed to keep the Families under control?

"There are conditions," he said, finally. "You will not be permitted military forces of any description, nor will you be permitted political or economic intelligence agencies. We will keep a close eye on you and we will intervene if you do something we don't like. And we will expect you to help us uncover the full nature of your crimes. Those… *individuals* who are guilty of real crimes will be punished."

Tiberius lifted his eyebrows, innocently. "And does that include events like the destruction of Dartmoor Station?"

Colin winced. Dartmoor had been a large orbital colony, owned and operated by the Edison Family as a retirement home for the family's elders and some of their embarrassments. Five years before Colin had run afoul of Admiral Percival, a terrorist group had smuggled a nuke onto the station and blown it into debris, killing over five thousand people. From what Colin had heard, they'd claimed to be composed of people who'd lost all settlement rights to their homeworld because of financial manipulation. It hadn't stopped the Empire launching a crackdown on terrorist groups that had sent hundreds of thousands fleeing to the Rim.

"You won't be able to manipulate the laws any longer," Colin said. "There *will* be changes."

"We understand," Tiberius said. "Perhaps we will even welcome them."

Colin, suspecting he was being mocked, gave the younger man a long considering look, then stood up and headed for the hatch. Outside, Daria, Mariko, Salgak and Anderson were waiting for him. They'd watched the entire discussion through the sensors.

"You've heard what he had to say," Colin said, once the hatch was firmly closed. He knew it was soundproofed. "Thoughts?"

"The Thousand Families underestimate us," Salgak whirred.

“Even if there are no major advancements in twenty years, the power of free competition will destroy them. Their skilled personnel will come work for us. Our facilities will produce better technology than their facilities. Those who had no choice, but to buy from them will buy from us instead. Their inflow of money will dwindle away until they run out of money. And then they too will fade away into nothingness.”

“Unless they are just trying to buy time,” Anderson objected. “Right now, they have nothing to lose by offering to surrender on terms. They’re going to lose their power and position anyway. But if they survive, in some form, they can plot to recover their power. It will take years to obliterate the patronage networks.”

He was right, Colin knew. Some clients were openly linked to their patrons. Others were far less obvious about their connections. It would take years even to identify them, let alone remove the clients from their posts. And if some of them were actually well-liked…

Daria and Mariko exchanged glances, then Daria stepped forward. “Hester will not be happy with the decision,” she said, “but I feel we should accept. Right now, we can win the battle, but lose the war. Given time, we can edge them out of the power structure completely and neutralise their threat to the economy.”

“They presumably know that too,” Anderson countered.

“But we can keep them under control, which is more than can be said for chaos,” Daria said. “I don’t think we can threaten starving rioters desperate for food to give to their families, let alone prevent piracy and outrages that will make the current situation look like nothing. We don’t have anything to threaten them with! There will be chaos on Earth — and across the Empire. We need to make the bargain, Colin. There’s no alternative.”

Colin hesitated. He *wanted* to make the Thousand Families pay, but Daria was right. They didn’t dare risk losing the rest of the economy. And Salgak, he hoped, was right too. Given time, the threat could be neutralised and rendered useless. The aristocracy would fade away, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

And no one else would have to die. He wouldn’t have to slaughter Home Fleet’s crewmen because their masters were too pigheaded to surrender, let alone take out Earth’s orbital industries or bombard the planet itself. The war could finally come to an end on excellent terms.

He stepped back into the conference room. “You’ll have your terms,” he said, slowly. “My people will occupy the high orbitals and Home Fleet’s starships, then land Marines in the High City itself. Your people *will* be protected.”

“I understand,” Tiberius said. He stood. “The Families Council will have no objection to your terms.”

Colin rather doubted it, but he kept that thought to himself. Maybe they would see sense after all.

He looked up as Daria brought in the single piece of paper, outlining the terms Tiberius read it quickly, then signed his name at the bottom with a real pen. Colin followed suit, wondering what would happen now. They'd won the war…

…And now they would have to win the peace.

* * *

Gaunt stared down at the communicator in her hand. "Did… did we just *win*?"

"Yes," Adeeba said. She grinned, remembering the naval myth of the Demon Murphy and how he messed everything up for those who cheered too soon. "Don't jinx it."

Chapter Forty

"This is how they live?"

Sidney walked down the streets of the High City, drinking in the weirdest complex he'd seen on any planet. The mansions were strange; they were built in a number of different styles, surrounded by gardens and tiny walls that offered no deterrent to someone who could climb. But, not unlike an asteroid settlement, it seemed that the walls merely marked someone's property. Custom dictated that no one was allowed to cross the walls without permission.

"Yes," the Sergeant said, simply.

"I don't believe it," Sidney said.

The handful of people on the streets seemed to be on shock. A couple of girls, both so stunningly pretty that they were almost inhuman, stared at the Marines and then fled, as if there were a pack of wild animals on their tail. Several servants looked at them with vague expressions of disapproval, then ignored the Marines completely. And a handful of underground fighters looked oddly disappointed. They'd been told that there would be no chance to loot.

"Just keep your eyes peeled open for trouble," the Sergeant ordered. "Right now, everyone is trying to work out what the fuck just happened. But that is going to change."

Sidney nodded. They'd been lucky, from what he'd picked up during the landing. Other regiments had been assigned to the orbital towers, spaceport complexes and food storage dumps. Some of them were bored, others were under near-constant attack from panicky civilians or rogue security forces. Earth had been a pressure cooker, held down by the Thousand Families. Now, the lid had been blown off. God alone knew where it would all end.

They'd won the war, he knew. Now they had to win the peace.

* * *

Colin had a fairly good idea of just how much wealth had been poured into the High City over the centuries. Each of the families, it seemed, had competed to see who could produce the most spectacular or tasteless building to add to the complex. But it still shocked him to see it in person as the shuttle flew over the city and landed in the small spaceport. There was enough money invested in the complex to feed Earth for hundreds of years.

"Colin," Adeeba called, as he climbed out of the shuttle. "Welcome to Earth!"

"Thank you," Colin said. He found himself giving her a tight hug. He'd missed her more than he cared to admit. "And Neil!"

"Good to see you again, sir," Frandsen said, gravely. "And thank you for the reinforcements. It got a bit dicey here for a while."

Colin grinned. "And Jeremy?"

"Recovering," Adeeba said. "We had him taken to the local medical centre, along with the other POWs. Most of them were unharmed, just locked up for a month or so. Jeremy got a brain probe, but not a serious one."

Colin shuddered. There was no such thing as a *light* brain probe. He'd read the medical reports on Penny Quick and found himself wondering, again, how she could bring herself to serve the Empire after being treated in such a matter. She'd come alarmingly close to losing her brain completely.

"The problem right now is the provisional government," Adeeba said, as they started to walk down a garden path. "Half of the underground leaders are on it and the other half think they should be on it. And then there's the fact that most of the people in charge of the infrastructure were appointed by the Empire…"

"Infighting will be the death of us," Colin muttered. Mars seemed on the brink of civil war, while Venus and Earth were experiencing limited clashes between different forces. "Can't you convince them to keep a lid on it?"

"Probably not for very long," Adeeba said. "Earth doesn't even have the basics of a democratic system. There's no way to take a vote and even if we did, the ones who didn't like it wouldn't consider themselves bound by it. We're trying to round up essential personnel now and transporting them off the planet, but that hasn't pleased everyone."

Colin sighed. Nine times out of ten, someone who was essential to the smooth functioning of Earth's depleted infrastructure was also someone the underground wanted to execute. And that someone wasn't above making deals for immunity in exchange for sharing his knowledge of how the system actually worked. One day after the fall — one *day* — and the planet felt on the verge of chaos.

"It wouldn't," he said, as they reached the medical centre. "But we can't please everyone, can we?"

Inside, it was surprisingly luxurious, with a dedicated medical team trained to cope with any emergency. Colin allowed a nurse to lead them into a side room, where Jeremy lay on the bed. He smiled weakly up at Colin when he arrived, then sat upright and saluted.

"I'm sorry about *Shadow*, sir," he said. "I know she meant a great deal to you."

Colin nodded. *Shadow* had been his first real command, even if

he'd had to mutiny to take the command chair. She would always be special to him. But he'd checked the files at Morrison and *Shadow* had been sent to the breakers. It was possible, he knew, that her hull was still intact, but she wouldn't be the same. He'd sent an urgent message anyway, hoping to preserve her for posterity.

"Don't worry about her," he said. "Are you all right?"

"I should be ready to return to duty in… well, now," Jeremy said. "They keep poking and prodding at me, but there doesn't seem to be anything really wrong."

"Good to hear it," Colin said. "And once they discharge you, properly, report for duty. We have a lot of work to do."

* * *

"They won," Penny said, quietly.

"So they did," Wachter agreed.

Penny looked over at him, sharply. There was no point in lying to herself and pretending that she hadn't fallen in love with the Admiral, but she had been nervous about making the first move. And he'd been a perfect gentleman during the time they'd shared a cabin. He hadn't even looked at her while she was sleeping, as far as she could tell.

"They did offer you a place," Penny said. "Are you going to take them up on it?"

Wachter hesitated, then nodded.

"I'm glad to hear it," Penny said. "Maybe you can reform the Imperial Navy as a whole."

"Maybe," Wachter agreed. "The Empire just lost its core. Whatever you think of the Thousand Families, they kept the Empire together. Now their power is shattered. The shockwaves may prove impossible to navigate."

"Not for you," Penny said.

Wachter looked at her for a long moment. "I hope so," he said, finally. "And you will be coming with me?"

"Yes, sir," Penny said. "If you'll have me, that is…"

He held out a hand to her. "Yes," he said. "Let's go."

Together, they walked out to face the future.

* * *

Tiberius had overseen the transfer of most of his family to Luna, where they would be safe from the chaos threatening the security of Earth, then found himself at a loose end. The Household Troops had

already been surrendered to the rebels — the *Provisional Government*, he had to remind himself — but he wasn't sure what to do with the rest of the family's holdings. Centuries of tradition and procedure had been swept away at the stroke of a pen.

Not everyone had gone along with it, he knew. Lady Madeline had vanished completely, which was surprising, while Lord Bernadotte's body had been discovered in his mansion. A brief investigation had failed to raise any leads; Tiberius suspected, privately, that they would never discover who had killed him. There were no shortage of people who had wanted Lord Bernadotte dead.

"My Lord," Sharon said, "you have an invitation to visit one of the rebel ships."

"Understood," Tiberius said. It wasn't a *real* invitation, he knew, more of a polite command. The rebels controlled the high orbitals and the High City, while the underground controlled the rest of the planet. "Tell them I'm on my way."

He'd expected to be summoned to the rebel flagship. Instead, the shuttle took him to a heavy cruiser, one that had been extensively modified. Tiberius wondered, absently, just who had summoned him; the rebels in charge of their industrial base had yet to reach Earth. Hell, they didn't even know that Earth had fallen and the war was over. But as the shuttle landed, he put the thoughts to one side. There were no shortage of people who wanted him dead too. It was quite possible that, whatever the treaty might say, some of the rebels wanted private revenge.

The guards searched him, then marched him through the corridors and into a small room. A red-headed woman sat at a table, with a slight oriental woman standing right behind her. She looked unimportant and yet there was something about her that nagged at Tiberius's mind, something oddly familiar.

"Good afternoon," the redhead said. "Do you know why you were called here?"

"No," Tiberius said. "I…"

"Next question," the redhead said, interrupting him. "Do you know why your father and grandfather died?"

"My grandfather supported the Empress," Tiberius said. There had been few details in the family archives about why he'd thought the Empress was worth supporting, but everyone knew the truth. But why would his *father* have died? "Why…"

He broke off, staring at the women. There were few pictures of the Empress available anywhere — the Thousand Families had worked hard to make her a non-person — but Tiberius had seen one of the surviving portraits. She had been short and slight… and there were limits to how many changes cosmetic surgery could make to a body.

"Yes," Mariko said, simply. "The time has come to retake the Empire."

Her brown eyes met Tiberius's eyes. Despite her size, he read iron determination and a sheer strength that had kept her going during a massive reversal in fortune. But then, if she'd *known* that the patronage networks would eventually overthrow her, she might have been making preparations for her exile and return all along.

"I knew the Empire was doomed… and your grandfather knew it too," she added. "Now, with the Thousand Families out of power, we can make real lasting change. And, *just incidentally*, preserve your position. Or do you think Colin can keep riding the tiger indefinitely?"

She smiled, almost girlishly, and held out a hand. "Join me?"

Tiberius hesitated. But he didn't hesitate for long. There was no choice, he saw. Either he pledged himself to her or he wouldn't leave the ship alive. And besides, she was right. The Provisional Government might not be able to keep a lid on the violence. If it lost control, he asked himself, who would look after the High City? Or prevent his workers from rising up against him?

Slowly, he reached out and took her hand.

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